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No. 3



DEATH-BY-RAIN

by RAY BRADBURY



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Imperial Terra or dying Mars?

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WARRIOR MAID of MARS



By ALFRED COPPEL

THE small room was dark but for the flickering light of a single oil-lamp that burned on the bare table between the two long rows of black-headed figures. The thin dry air was saturated with the sweetness of a nutty-drawn cord . . . a stranger's cord. A sentence of death had been passed in silence. Now, the roommates billowed, still in silence, no select from their number a leader.

The High Council of the Malthe was in session. Behind the dark, enigmatic robe usulas and robes lacked all the might and bote of a proud, ancient and dying culture. The might of a world's warrior-assembly. The hope that was the unrequited, dimpled center of a doomed world's happiness . . .

Beneath the black cord that shadowed his face young Tella of Lure's eyes showed those pale as marble after midnight passed silently toward his end of the table. It seemed that the vote would be overwhelmingly in his favor, and a tremor of anticipation ran through him. At the far end of the board he could see his rival candidate's eyes glimmering fiercely. The Malthe would not be led by Brand, that much was certain. The assembled nobles were quite gleefully repudiating his leadership for that of the young Lord of Lure.

Outside the tower room, the sky wind shrieked and gambled through the cracks of the ancient fortress like a harlequin of doom. The draughts on the candle flames to dancing wildly, and long shadows leapt from wall to wall.

Tella stretched his long legs out under the table. To him, the evening seemed unconcerningly prolonged and uneventful, but he knew better than to voice opposition to customs that had been accepted in the Malthe since long before

Then the cannibal-people were upon them—a savage, shrieking horde

the Laurr, the dictator-king who took the name of the very planet for themselves, had driven the society underground.

The young warrior was forced to admit that ritual and treppings were an important part of the superstitions held the Mobba led on the great masses of Laurr. And, with the populace crowd, anything was possible. Even the Laurr himself would not care to face the unanimous disapproval of this masked hierarchy. Too many Laurr, down through the secret of the planet's history, had fallen before the blades of Mobba assassins.

Telsa watched the glittering eyes that peered out from behind the padded mask that hid Prince Brand's handsome face. The man knew he was detected, and right seemed to surround him like a malign sorcery. Brand would never be satisfied with the deputy command that would be his for having been second in the bolting. The man wanted full authority, not command of scraps in the field as Telsa had had. Brand was far too concerned with his own safety for that, he wanted command of the striking force of assassins that would murder the handful of invaders out in the desert. The victory over a few scientists from another world would give Brand the crown he craved and at negligible risk, for all his dark talk about mystery weapons and his plans for conquest.

The only need for caution that Telsa could see was the possible intervention of the Temple or the Laurr. And the Temple knew nothing. And the Laurr could be handled . . . by Telsa.

Telsa looked around him, wondering the masked nobles would have done with it. It would not be a safe thing to have the Temple learn that the Mobba met in Telsa's own palace quarters. He served with satisfaction that the evening had ended.

The clanking wind outside died suddenly, leaving a thick silence.

A black figure arose from either side of the table. The one on the right turned toward Telsa, and his voice had a stronger and disenchanted timbre in the stillness.

"Telsa of Lora," it said, "you lead."

Telsa inclined his head in acceptance. Tenacity was part of the ancient traditions of the Mobba.

The figure on the left turned toward Brand. "Brand, Prince of Laurr, you follow."

Brand bowed himself to his feet. "I permit this much!" he said thickly. "Why am to follow him? He is not even of royal birth!"

The seated figure on the left turned to Telsa. Its voice sounded suddenly almost metallic. "You follow," it repeated deliberately.

Brand stood irresolutely, two solid rows of shadowed faces turned toward him. Then Telsa spoke up softly, almost casually.

"A challenge, Brand, to decide?"

"I follow," muttered Brand, making up his mind silently.

Telsa smiled to himself. It ever a crowd like Brand should pick up a flag challenge, surely the Winter Godlike would throw down the moons!

Slowly, the hooded man fled from the door, leaving Telsa alone. For a moment Brand stared by the door, and Telsa could see that he fingered his sword hilt under the table robes. But he stood so, glaring at Telsa, for only a minute. Then he was gone.

From the darkness of the courtyard beneath the cover window came the sound of a whistle, and Lord Telsa relaxed. The bearded guardman's sign indicated that the last member of the Mobba had mounted his silk and was safely away.

TELSA felt a stirring of pride. Any victory was a pleasing thing to him; but tonight's swathing triumph over Brand was a threat the prospects pinching would long remember! The Mobba had chosen to forget that he, Telsa, came only from the lower nobility.

His position as Captain-General of the Laurr's armies, as well as the real influence the ruler had for him, had been a huge factor in the selection, Telsa knew. The Mobba was certain that the old Laurr was fond enough of his young Captain-General to overlook the breach of faith contemplated for the morning . . .

Telsa doffed his robes and dressed himself with care. Always fastidious about his appearance, he knew that this night his dress must be impeccable. The Laurr of Laurr was very particular about such things.

With a last check at his jeweled harness, Telsa stepped before the polished oxya mirror. The image that peered calmly back at him from its dark surface was solemnly unspending, he reflected, even for the Laurr of Laurr. He was tall and well-toned, the nose burnished, bright with gems, hung low on his hips; his long legs were bare, and his chest covered only by the crossed straps that supported his weapons.

The black silk-leather was adorned with battle decorations. It would be well, Telsa mused, to remind the Laurr of his many services to the throne. Truly, perhaps, but nonetheless firmly.

All the years won in the Great campaigns and in the last Winter War were there, as was the golden cross of the Laurr's own Kingdom . . . presented to Telsa by the hand whose blessing he planned to seek this very night.

Glimacing at his chronometer, Telsa turned away from the mirror. Through the high, narrow window of his palace quarters, the light of the narrow moon streamed in golden glory, shooting the flickle light of the oil-lamp. Telsa stopped in the window, his gaze locking the low bulb beyond the veil, shadow weavers of the Grand Canal. The beauty of the night caught at his breast, for, even as he watched, the great orb of the farther moon was rising solemnly in

and its light to the steadily pulsating glow of her burning rim.

Below and across the palace grounds the flickering lights of the city spread like a web of living beads in the moonlight.

As always, Telsa felt a rush of pride as he contemplated the beauty of his world. A great sadness filled him then, for he knew that such beauty could not last nearly longer. Soon now the sun would rise on a planet of death. . . .

Telsa shuddered and turned away. The beauty of the night faded, leaving only reality. And reality was stark and deadly on Lora. The water was vanishing, and the great plains that had once been green and fertile were now cracked wastelands. Lora, far to the north, was deserted now, for the canal had silted up and life had become unbearable. And now the great deserts of toxic sands stood at the very shores of the Grand Canal, and what did flow down from the pole was barely enough to keep the watercourse free of red silt.

Centuries ago, before the great Wars that had almost wrecked the planet, the scientists had seen the drought coming. They had known that the air and the water would steadily unite with Lora's shirley trees, leaving the planet barren and desiccated beyond belief.

They had tried to plan for that day and had built the great waterways as part of their conservation program. Other projects had been started: mysterious power plants far out in the deserts with walls of dark-black sand had been built. But somewhere nothing good had come from these mysterious Temples. The first of the Ten Great Wars that had begun even then, and the warring people of the planet had demanded weapons from these strange places.

For many generations the engineers-primus had refused the pleas and demands, but, as the steadily diminishing water supplies had caused war after war after war, they relented.

From the sand-lined Temples had come a steady flow of gleaming weapons. Weapons that left Lora's cities shuddering piles of rubble to be covered by the drifting sands. Weapons that had destroyed forever the once flourishing nations that might have saved the world from its inexorable doom.

The secrets of the past were forgotten . . . or covered with legendary drags. But the wars went on and on and on.

Telsa knew, staring out across the rusty sands, that Lora was doomed to a quick death. It would not come in his lifetime . . . but soon . . . soon . . .

And then the Tellurians had come! To plant and exploit. To send the hordes of the deserts and drain away the last of the planet's resources to their wastefully wealthy world! Even the Lora of Lora had given them safe-conduct . . . on the basis that their expedition proved some of the Temple's favored dogmas concerning the origin of the race!

Wachman! thought Telsa savagely. It fills us as life slips away from our planet. But it would not be so! The ancient, dreaded Makhia would see to that! If Lora must die, then at least she could die upright and unassailed by glaucous invaders!

In sudden fury, Telsa snatched up his cloak and strode from the room. The jeweled plyph of the Water Goddian, Mother of Lora, gleamed fiercely for a moment on the hilt of his short-sword in the feeble light as Telsa sought the long winding ramp that led to the lower levels and the audience chamber of the Lora of Lora.

Along arched corridors, oil-lit and lined with aged gardeners, Lord Telsa of Lora made his way. Unchecked, the ever-present drift of reddish sand drifted as he walked.

Turning onto the main passageway that led to the main courtyard, Telsa heard the sound of his name . . . softly spoken, but demanding. Stopping, he looked about him. A dark-robed figure beckoned to him from the shadow of a huge stone banner. It was Gorka, First Cycle Priest of the Temple, and Telsa's long-standing friend at court. His eyes were swollen in his round, good-humored face.

"I have met you just in time. You are on your way to see the Lora, friend Telsa?"

Telsa nodded. "Of course. I am already keeping him waiting. I'll see you in the morning, friend Gorka." He made a move to slip by the young Priest and be on his way.

"A moment, Telsa!" Gorka's voice was suddenly sharp. "You are about to ask the Lora to break her word to the outsiders, are you not?"

Telsa's eyes narrowed. "Perhaps . . ."

GORKA had a hand on his arm. "Telsa, I have known you for many hours. As children we played together on the fields of Lora. Believe me, I wish nothing but the best for you. Why are you involved with this bloody-mindedness of the Makhia?"

Telsa withdrew his arm as though the Priest had stung him. Only the strength of a lifelong friendship kept him from striking Gorka, for the Priest's words had hit a deep-seated prejudice. The Makhia was the nobility . . . and Gorka was a Commoner.

Gorka went on slowly, emphasizing his words carefully. "Dorfin knows of your plan to break the Lora's pledge and attack the Tellurian camp."

Telsa stiffened. How was it possible? He had told no one!

The Priest diverted his thoughts. "The Temple has sworn, Telsa, of knowing such things. The Makhia can bribe a guard . . . and the Temple can bribe him again. You should have thought of that tonight."

Telsa drew himself back. "So?"

"You are foolish, my friend. And it is the

duty of the Temple to see that Larru does not suffer for your foolishness. The Makla is a fearful thing, Tella, a creature of sensitive skin. Why do you hate the Tellurians? You have never even seen one. They are not men like ourselves, and they bring gifts of great promise to Larru. It is not fit that such as you should be joined with a rumpsteak like Prince Brand . . . a criminal and a lying scoundrel . . . and for the purpose of attacking those who have come across to seek knowledge and friendship!"

Tella pondered. What Gorta said about Brand was largely true. The man was unscrupulous and unscrupulous, a blind seeker of power. But prejudices of caste and upbringing were too much to consider. And to reject now would be to mark himself a coward in a world that lived by the sword. It was unthinkable!

"You, Gorta," Tella said pointedly, "should limit yourself to scientific and theological matters and leave matters of state and policy to those better equipped to handle them."

Gorta shook his head sadly. "Foolish friend! This has come back on the unmistakable note of command. 'In the name of, and by the authority of the Temple, I demand that you abandon your present attack on the Tellurian camp.'"

Tella threw back his head and laughed. "Demand, is it? I know of no plan to attack the Tellurians, friend. First, now or in the future! Now kindly step aside. I cannot make the Larru of Larru wait on me while I argue senseless points with you . . ."

Gorta sounded dejected. "Then you refuse?"

Tella frowned at his friend. "Of course, I refuse! And you may carry that message back to Durlin . . . if there is such a place!"

With that he turned away, but not before Gorta had his hand on Tella's arm and said: "Then forgive me, old friend . . ."

Tella wondered at that. Pardon? Pardon what? Then other matters forced that question from his mind. So the Temple knew of the Makla's plan to assassinate the alien. To what extent, he wondered, would the Temple go in striving for its own undeniable purpose to save the Tellurian settlement? And why? In spite of himself, Tella could not suppress a shudder, for the Temple was powerful . . . perhaps the most powerful thing remaining on the desolated planet of Larru.

The secret order of the Temple Priests dated so far before the Tin Water Wars that had so devastated the globe with their atomic fury its beginnings were lost in the dust mists of antiquity, even including the building of waterways. The membership was perhaps the one body selected for any purpose on Larru without consideration of family or background, and this fact accounted for the fierce loyalty of such able young Commissioners as Gorta.

The last wars and the struggle for survival had destroyed much of the nation's science, and what remained lay within the jurisdiction of the

Temple. As it so often happens in times of great stress, science on the world of Larru had taken on the vestments of religion in order to survive. A broad-based, scientific hierarchy, the Priests of the Seven Cycles upon their elevated towers delving into the great knowledge of the ancients, seeking the answers to riddles solved long ago and forgotten in the fratricidal wars that were the direct result of the dwindling water supply. Obviously, the Temple conducted the world-wide worship of the Water Goddes, principal deity in the Larruan Pantheon, but usually the Priests were absorbed in striving frantically to salvage what little they could from the wreckage of the ancient civilization on a desolated and quarrelsome planet.

ALL the Tella of Larru knew only vaguely. He was a soldier, and basic concerned with the ins and outs of the scientific discovery of the Temple. His life up to now had been spent largely in wars and campaigns, in love-making and the less exciting processes of the hierarchy. Only the coming of the Tellurians had moved him to take a more direct part in the doings of the court circles, for above all he loved Larru, and in the outlanders Tella saw the final, irremediable insult to his beloved, prosperous home-world.

The government of the Larru of Larru and the Temple seldom clashed. Each remained within its proper sphere, and both were constant. But into this peculiar age-old arrangement the Tellurian spaceship had fallen like a disruptive bolt from the sky. And once—once like the men of Larru—had emerged from the vessel . . . seeming to prove the Temple's much-debated hypothesis that both Larru and the planet the alien called Terra had been colonized by a great race of interstellar wanderers. How much more could be proved or done with the Tellurians' aid remained to be seen. The Temple was already calling them the Redcomers of Larru, and through its good offices a safe-conduct had been granted by the Larru of Larru himself.

They had come seeking steel. They wanted to mine and learn, perhaps, to colonize, though Larru was uncomfortable for them. But the Makla found reasonable. The Tellurians were barbarians, and the ancient nobles of Larru agreed at their intrusion.

Tella found himself among these objections. For many heads, Larru had known of its approaching doom and it wished to die. Tella thought, as it had lived—priced and unquenched. The Tellurians were outsiders who had no place on the barren face of his Larru . . . and it was Tella's mission to drive them away or destroy them. For that he had been chosen leader of the week that the Makla planned to mount in the morning.

Already agents had been sent out to agitate among the degenerate tribes of the desert—the curbed Gorta—and the Makla was aware of at least four thousand tribesmen in arms in return

for food and plunder. The power of the Makhia, five hundred well-armed soldiers, added to the mass of Gaskia seemed more than enough to handle a small scientific expedition from space.

Now, as he left the great wing of the palace and strode across the dark courtyard that separated him from the household quarters of the ruler's family, Tella paused to himself. The intruding Tellurians were due for a shock. Their soft-soled shoes would be needed within the hall and Laurr would be free of them before the sun set again!

He was almost across the yard and into the gate of the household wing when something made him pause. He had the feeling of being watched . . . followed. His sharp eyes swept the whole of the courtyard. It was walled and heavily planted with desert shrubs so that his suspicious told him nothing. He shrugged and turned again toward the gate.

One step he took, and no more. From overhead came the low whirring of an airship's idling motor. He stopped short, searching the sky for the craft. A star in the air low over the Laurr's palace at this time of night could mean nothing good.

The sharp clank of metal behind him made him swing around, his sword flashing from its scabbard. Three hooded figures were almost upon him, naked steel in their hands. Tella thought wildly of calling for aid, and then he realized that these men would never dare so attack him if they had not either bribed or killed the household guards. Instinctively, he thought of Brand. Was this the renegade's design? By killing him and sparing his body over, Brand could control before the Makhia that Tella had lost courage at the last moment and had rather than lead them in an overt act against the Tellurians . . .

There was no more time for thought, for the three men were upon him. He slipped his sword sword first and stood facing them, searching for some hint as to their identity. Overhead the airship hovered, waiting . . .

With a cry, Tella leaped forward and caught one of the attackers on his point. The man doubled up and fell to his knees as his two companions closed in. The courtyard now echoed the ring of steel on steel, and the labored breathing of men fighting.

Tella fought bravely. He was fighting for his life—and for what was even more important as Laurr—his honor as a warrior.

His blade wore a deadly, glittering web in the darkness, but his two assailants closed in steadily. The whining sound of the airship was nearer now, and Tella glanced upward to see if he could catch a glimpse of the aircraft. His heart sank.

The ship was a dark blur across the stars, but he could see that a rope ladder hung down into the court and more men were pouring down, swords in hand.

Suddenly, Tella pressed forward, trying to

rush the attackers and gain a brief respite. One of the men flung in the low back and followed with a thrust at the head that caught Tella a glancing blow on the temple and set the stars to dancing before his eyes.

The fellow crouched as nimbly and Tella heard his companion hiss: "Careful, you fool!"

Tella's sword stilled under the concerted rush of the second man, and he was forced to retreat until his back touched the roughness of the courtyard wall. There could be no further retreat.

The assailants separated now, so that Tella was forced to strike wildly from side to side to avoid being hit. His sword made a glittering arc as he parried a near thrust and a lightning spurt pierced the woodwork of his nearest attacker.

Before the others who had dropped from the sky could close on him, Tella whirled and ran along the base of the wall. If he could reach the gate of the household wing he would be safe, for no assassin would dare follow him into the inner sanctum of the Laurr himself.

He heard a voice shouting hoarsely in the darkness, and other voices replying sternly, urgently.

"We've lost him!"

"The devil's wounded Mart and Varr!"

"Find him, you fools! He must be taken."

Tella ran breathlessly along the wall, hoping against hope that the gate would not be covered. It was a vain hope. As he broke out of the shrubbery, the shouts began again and he was forced to retreat into the shelter of a towering desert plant.

He waited there, breath coming in long rasping gasps, and his head aching from the blow he had taken.

With pounding heart he listened to the attackers beating the bushes for him and cheering commands and advice to one another. More men must still be coming down from the airship, for there were fully ten in the dark courtyard now.

"He can't have gotten far!"

"See that the gate is covered—"

"How the young devil does fight!"

"Pence that back there! I saw something move!"

Tella tried to smother his labored breathing as the group drew nearer to his hiding place. His hands cradled his two swords tightly as the searchers spread out into a semicircle and moved steadily toward him.

Tella crossed himself to leap. Within moments, they would be upon him and certainly as Laurr showed no mercy, particularly to one who had wounded two of their craft. He doubled his legs under him and waited.

"There he is!"

Tella burst from hiding and braced himself for the rush. His back was once again against the wall and this time, he knew, there would be no escape.

A glittering circle of naked swords surrounded him and he looked out fearfully, driving the swordsmen back by the mere force of his charge.

Then it was that a surly beam of light from the closely guarded gate caught a jeweled ghyb on the breast of one of the assassins and Tels' beam froze. The assassin was the Sword and Aton—the origin of the Sentinel Guard of the Holy Temple!

The disclosure was like a blow. It was Gorka rather than Brand, who was trying to kill him! The latter understanding seemed to sap his strength. When he felt the man-pun's nagging impact, it was almost a relief. Blackness came . . . darker than the primordial night, and he felt himself falling . . .

II

THERE was wind on his face, and the air was bitterly cold. Tels' eyes. His harness covered him only slightly, and his bare limbs and naked chest swung under the lash of the icy night air. Pines somewhere, muffled by the roaring of the wind, Tels could hear the familiar howl of a multiple-pulse jet engine. Under his quivering hands lay the cracked deck of an air-ship, and he realized that the aircraft was under way and that he was linked to rings in the air-ship.

With a shuddering sigh, he forced himself to relax. Since his obligation so obviously had the better of him at the moment, there was little he could do other than wait and wait.

For what seemed to be several hours, he lay quiet and watched the motionless procession of the stars overhead. Finally, as the hot efforts of the man-pun's belt wore off, he lifted his head to get a look at his captors.

In the greenish glow of phosphorescent light that emanated from the instrument on the ship's panel, he could see two figures seated at the controls. The dim light glimmered for a moment on an insignia—the Sword and Aton. He had not been mistaken back there in the courtyard. He was in the hands of the Temple.

The man now glanced in his direction and, seeing that he had awakened, leaned forward to speak. There was no surprise in Tels as he recognized him. Only a hot anger. For the man was his friend Gorka.

"Tels! Are you all right?" Gorka had to shout to make himself heard over the rush of the wind.

Tels felt his anger increase. Here was Gorka, who had had him crushed, strangled, and finally kidnapped! And now, it seemed, he was concerned over the state of his health and general condition! It did not matter that Brand would within hours be convincing the president of the Maida that Tels of Lore was a benevolent wizard who disappeared in the eleventh hour

before the attack on the alien' camp! What mattered to Gorka was simply: "Tels, are you all right?"

Giving nothing but a scowl from Tels, the young Prince sat back, a ball writhing on his exposed, pained face. He could well imagine what Tels' thoughts were about now. Hurt pride and mortified anger were apparent in every line of the Lord of Lore's tense body.

For hour after hour the air-ship sped along through the smooth night air. The further across air and the more racing nearer moon rose again in the west and charged manfully across the back-drop of the coral stars. Tels could not see his chronometer, but he estimated that they had been traveling almost all night at the highest speed the ship could handle. The pinking of the jet was a smooth, continuous purr. They were heading on a westerly direction, after a bit of mental mathematics, Tels estimated that they must be very near the heart of the Great Red Desert and a long, long way from the capital.

As he struggled to keep from freezing, the young noble estimated his chances for survival on this strange flight. He knew these disconcertingly alien. For some reason, the seemingly benevolent Tenside had intervened harshly and successfully in the plan to destroy the Tellerstone. But it should have been apparent to the Prince that his abduction would not stop the attack. There were plenty of men to take his place. Brand, surely. Then why was he being held?

Perhaps the Temple did not wish what he should run the mission of the Lord of Lore for the Maida's plan. But why abduction, then? Why not merely hold him prisoner until the attack was begun? The course of the night showed a great deal of careful planning and organization. Such things took time. And again, why? Tels had a strong suspicion that in some way the great kindness that the Lord of Lore had for him, and the correspondingly large influence he wielded because of it had more than a little to do with these strange and dangerous doings . . .

The course of the air-ship as it slanted sharply downward interrupted his thoughts. They were nearing their destination, and whoever was in store for him would not be long in materializing.

Gorka arose from his seat at the panel and cautiously made his way across the precariously canted deck. Reaching Tels' side, he knelt and brought his lips close to the young warrior's ear.

"We near our home, Tels, my friend," he shouted. "I beg of you to be prudent and to restrain yourself when you are interviewed. The Tangle alien are wise men and you will do well to listen and listen when they speak with you . . ."

Tels made an angry retort that the wind snatched from his lips and whirled away into the night.

"I know you are angry with me, Tels," the

young Prince continued, "but you have made all this necessary. Remember, it is for Lauri!" He laid an arm across the prisoner's shoulder, but Tels could not find the heart even in his anger to shrug off. "And," the Prince was smiling now, "you shall see Daxias, Tels. Now lay down and do . . ."

Daxias! Then there was such a place! The legends told of it—a fabled city hidden from the sight of men by some mysterious power, where the Forces of the mighty Seventh Cycle clustered themselves to study the clues of the ancient riddles. Daxias! Even the name had a magical sound! It was here that the Temple's inner sancta were used to struggle in their quest to reclaim Lauri's air and water from the sea of rust that surrounded them.

Goeth appeared the young lord's shoulder in an impulsive gesture of friendship and returned to his place at the sled's point. Tels stood out into the night, his eyes trying to pierce the darkness. The sight of actually seeing Daxias still astonished him and, even though he was striving to press up like a fiend for the daughter, the experience promised to be a rich one. He recalled many arguments with Goeth about the probable existence of the Temple City. He had conceded that invisibility was impossible, and Goeth in his young scientist's enthusiasm had covered above and about with voluminous wrong mathematical symbols to prove that a light-shielding field could be created.

Tels smiled thinly. If Daxias was near, and it seemed to be, then a light should mean surely exist . . . but he could see nothing but desert below in the moonlight.

The aircraft wobbled slightly as the pilot flared out his long glide, and with a breathtaking suddenness, the men and the moon vanished, leaving only a table blackness around them. Down upon the sled plunged, and after several moments the glide flattered upon. For a moment it hovered, and then it dropped sharply, and there was a hissing sound as the runners touched the ferric sand. They were down.

A company of Temple Guardians, bearing torches appeared out of the darkness, and Tels was freed from the dark-rings. Respectfully, but firmly, he was taken into custody and marched across the gray soil of the landing field toward a lighted gate in the darkness.

The light should never have been impervious to moonlight, or perhaps it was made transparent during the hours of daylight. Tels never knew. But as they made their way toward the gate, the van rose with its usual, breathtaking suddenness. The clear air of Lauri pervaded my dream or twilight and, when the van burst over the horizon, the transition from blackness to day was done with shocking speed. It was a phenomenon that Tels had seen every morning of his six months, but that time the effect was different. For never before had Tels seen such a city as marvelled Daxias!

AND, as though created in a trice out of the very stuff of darkness, Daxias sprang into being before his astonished eyes. The flood of golden light from the sun touched the spires and corners of an enchanted city, casting shards of amber light into the deep shadows between the slender towers. Unable to help himself, Tels passed to wonder. His gaze found the great golden dome that housed the Mirror of the Sky . . . fabled place where legend said that a man might sit and see the planets of the heavens reflected on a monster glass of polished obsidian, figured by the cunning hands of artificers dead over eight thousand years!

Tels had long been a seafarer . . . but here was good! and further off, looking in the warm morning light, there was the list of the Goddess . . . a great spire capped by a monolith sphere. This was the machine that the stories claimed could shatter even the smallest particles of matter and suck out of them the pure force that was the essence of their being, even as had the ancient long ago. It was from a sinister machine, the Temple Priests swore, that the hellish missiles of the first night When War had been fashioned . . . the terrible weapons that had left the once great cities of Lauri in molten, ghastly heaps of slag, later to be covered over and obliterated by the steadily rising tide of rust from the deserts.

And here it all was before him! Here was Daxias, City of the Temple!

Stunned by beauty and overwhelmed by memories to the night of the conquest, Tels stumbled along toward the gate. For the moment, his own plight was forgotten in the amazing glory of seeing fabled Daxias and knowing that there was truth in the tales the Priests told to the people who craved for life in a world closed for death.

Surely, Tels thought, if Lauri can be saved from collapse, the workers of such miracles as these could save it!

The thought of Lauri brought him up sharply. It brought back a cold awareness of his purpose . . . of his will to escape and regain the Middle in its snare on the bleeding Tallema. The attack that should at this moment be under way!

Whatever happened to him in this fery city, Tels swore by the Goddess herself that he would not allow himself to forget his duty. Surely, such wonders as these were not means to be shared with the barbarians from across the sand!

The thought remained with him as he was escorted into the city, and along wide thoroughfares heavily travelled with silk-drawn carriages. Above, an occasional air-dad passed, but in the main the city's travelling was done on feet or by means of the ubiquitous sikh . . . a six-legged, docile, goat-bearded beast that was the sole remaining remnant of its race left on Lauri.

Tels was taken first to the anterooms of the

Central Temple, where a kindly-faced Third-Cycle Priest assigned him quarters. From there, he was taken to the tall spire apparently reserved for sudden guests of the Temple.

In respectful silence, he was led of his hands and left alone in a room such as he had never dreamed of occupying in his own barbaric fortress . . . or even in the palace of the Lairs of Laur himself.

One curving wall was made entirely of glass, and it faced the city to the west and the desert to the north, so that the whole magnificent panorama stretched out before him like a framed picture. And the furnishings? By the Goddess! He had not dreamed that the somber self-sufficiency of the Temple did themselves so well! Suspecting the presence of listening devices or peep-holes, he crept. He found nothing. A soft cushioned bed waited invitingly, reminding him that the only rest he had had had been the stupor induced by the strain-elixir, and a table laden with refreshments and wines stood in the center of the deep-pile carpet. What a difference from the stone floors and the draughty keeps to which he was accustomed!

Recalling that he had not eaten for some time, he fell to on the laden table. And then, as wash-water sank over him, he laid himself fully dressed on the wide bed to rest and await whatever came next. Telsa was a soldier and, like all soldiers everywhere, he ate first, rested next, and was content to await developments in all the comfort that his surroundings could afford him.

For a prisoner, he thought with a wry smile, I am certainly being treated royally. By the Goddess! How would I be treated if I were a friend?

At last the strains of the night's concert took its toll of him, and the young Lord of Laur slept at the Temple City of Daxian awake in its many and varied tasks . . .

THE pointer on his chronometer stood at the twenty-second hour and the sun was low on the horizon when Telsa was awakened by a low-keyed concert at his bedside.

With a respectful bow, the man indicated that Telsa should follow him, and the young lord waited him through the door, satisfied that within a very short time he would be before someone in authority here. His mind was full of thoughts concerning the attack on the camp that by this time the Malins must surely have completed, unless . . .

Unless his disappearance had disrupted the carefully laid plans that had taken the secret organization so long to complete. In that case, agents would have to be sent out again among the Quid desert tribesmen to instruct the chiefs concerning a lure due to be used for the attack, and a different leader would of course have to be picked. Telsa grimaced. It would be Round, naturally. And all the high officers of the

Malins would be convinced that Telsa had defected, for they had no notion that the Temple was involved or that it even knew of the projected attack. One way or another Telsa of Laur would be the suspectant . . . Prince Round would see to that!

Telsa's guide led him out of the spire and into a side-driven car. The great beast stopped silently along, up an padded pass, ascending on the vertical mass of the thoroughfare.

As they neared the center of the city, Telsa saw that he was being taken to the Central Temple, a graceful structure of alabaster whiteness. The guide halted the auto before the Temple and Telsa alighted. An attendant came forward to take charge of the auto, and the escort motioned Telsa into the building.

They passed the portal and entered into a fairy-land within a fairyland, for the inner rooms of the Central Temple were by far the most wondrous in all Daxian. There were parallel walls of purest quartz crystal, faceted to reflect the light in enchanting beams of polychromatic loveliness. And the mosaic floors depicted in silver and gold the scenes of historical significance from the long life of the Temple. A thousand other things there were that filled the young warrior with awe . . . for more beauty per se had long ago pined the surface of Laur, and only here in the innermost sanctum of the Temple could such things survive and be cherished.

Another thing Telsa noticed also. Though guards abounded outside the city, he had seen but a handful within the walls. He remembered something Goria had told him long ago: this science could not really thrive against a scientific background, and that was why so much of the ancient lore was lost when the planet became nothing more than a backswamp. Plainly, the city of Daxian was not ruled by force, and a book for loreless men might not be the impossible achievement that he had begun to imagine it.

Now they were within a long hallway, bare but for the crystal paneling. From somewhere came the whispering of plaintive music. It filled the air with a gentle melody that found a strangely responsive chord in Telsa. He was told that the sound came from another chamber where a Priest was engaged in research on sounds and their effect on human emotions. It had been so long since music entered on Laur that even this knowledge had been forgotten . . .

The guide led Telsa on and on, past the long hall and through many portals that opened at last upon a small circular room devoid of any sort of ornamentation. In the center of this room, a man sat at a table that rose in graceful lines out of the floor itself. He was old, old.

Telsa stared at the man. He wore the white robes and the insignia of the Seventh Cycle, the youngest rank of priest-scientist. Recognition came, too. This man was not merely a Seventh Cycle Priest . . . he was actually the High Superior of the Temple. The old eyes and hunched

face, the long white beard and noble robe were the same as he remembered from a bearded silhouette in a hundred painted Temples.

Tels would have thrown himself to his knees before the upturned beard of old Larrs had he not suddenly remembered that he was a prisoner here, obstructed the way observing Commander.

He looked steadily around the room then, and for the first time he saw the girl.

A noble of Larrs had plenty of opportunity to become something of a connoisseur in the matter of woman flesh, but the moment that Tels' eyes found the girl's he knew that here was something special.

Her hair was black and her skin fair, a combination seldom found on this side of the planet where bronze skin and brown hair were almost universal, but Tels had heard tales of such women from brother soldiers who had carried the Larrs' bodies of affliction to the northern hemisphere. The clothes this woman wore were strange . . . a blouse covered her where most Larrsian women wore rads, and a short skirt descended from a hemline not unlike Tels' own. Her belt was hung with various pouches and holsters. And over all, she effected a transparent jumper of stiff like flexible glass that covered her from neck to ankles like a jumpsuit. Her eyes were deeply shadowed, and she seemed either ill or terribly disheartened . . . or both.

SHE stood in silence, a bearded man at her side, so all hearts and purposes a prisoner like himself, for the same no records and to be dismissed upon Larrs was to be a prisoner . . . even the peace-loving Temple Priests packed their full complement of weapons.

There was an air about the girl that reached Tels deeply, a deep-tested strength and quality, even through her obvious illness or discomfort. He wondered at her crime. Heavy, perhaps? He had never heard of the Temple swerving heretics . . . the Water Goddess was more a useful possession than a demanding deity. But perhaps this girl was something special in the matter of heretics as she obviously was in the matter of beauty.

But the explanation was not a satisfying one. There was something more. Then it came to him like a sword-thrust. Could the girl be . . . a Tel-lanar? Was it possible?

The intense words of his secret interrupted his thought.

"Reverend High Superior, here is Lord Tels of Larrs, Captain-General of the Larrs of Larrs' Armies."

The Superior inspected him kindly enough. "I have heard that two of our guardians were injured in taking young Tels. How are they now?"

"They suffered wounds, one critical," reported the priest. "Both will live, Reverend Superior."

The old man nodded. "It is well." Then he turned to Tels and he added. "How well you fight for your prejudices, my son!"

Tels remained stiffly erect and silent, his eyes fixed on the unknown girl. For the moment all he could do was to watch and wait for an opportunity to escape.

"You will be interested to know, My Lord of Larrs," said the High Superior mildly, "that the scheduled attack on the Tel-lanar camp was not launched this morning . . ."

Tels relaxed slightly. Then there was still a chance to redeem himself in the eyes of his fellow nobles. Perhaps soon.

". . . but you are no longer members of that abominable organization, the Maldis, for which you should give thanks to the Goddess! At the moment your so-called friends are meeting to replace you with our Prince Brerd," the High Superior continued. "They have declared in his indignation that you are a coward and a prisoner. Those are the words of your fine friends. What do you think of them?"

Tels felt a stirring of anger. "If what you say is true, Reverend Superior, I have the Temple and you to thank for my disgrace."

The High Superior looked reproachful. "Like the rest of your race," he sighed wearily, "you are blind. I suppose it will be an impossibility to convince you that your Maldis is doing infinitely more harm than good with its senseless code of slaughter and more slaughter. This is all it will ever succeed in bringing to our suffering planet!"

Tels held his peace. There was nothing he could say to refute the High Superior that was not based on evidence to lifelong prejudices, and he somehow felt that those arguments would be wasted on such a man as now sat before him.

"Yet I must try," the old priest continued, "to teach you the difference between rightful guide and awful, destructive arrogance. I must try to make you see that these Tel-lanars you profess to hate are . . ."

Here Tels' eyes caught the girl, but her expression told him nothing. He looked back at the High Superior.

". . . that you profess to hate is not now Larrs' only chance for survival."

"Watch," Tels said coldly.

The old man smiled slowly. "But true words. Words that can bring life instead of death. Better words than you will ever hear in that barbaric Maldis!" His old eyes seemed to bore through Tels now, stripping him bare of uncollected biases and misunderstanding. "We could," the priest mused, "turn you over to our psychologists and let them drive the devil out of your mind . . ." He paused thoughtfully. "But no. That would not be the same. You, yourself, must come to understand. You must be allowed to learn of your mistakes ways without interference."

Tels frowned. "Abduction, then, is not interference."

"We regret the necessity. But the lack of time made it necessary. The attack on the camp had to be delayed and the Maldis chose to sit alone

too quickly," said the High Superior. "At least we have been able to cause a delay of that nature yet."

"Now or later," said Tels carefully. "It will come."

"And with it death to those who offer us redemption and life?"

"Redemption?" asked Tels hotly, his eyes fell on the girl. "Slavery!"

The High Superior sank back in his chair wearily. "I should have known," he muttered disgustedly. "Well, so be it, then. You will remain here in Dorian until we are able to evolve some scheme for the protection of our friends. In time even you will see that we act for the best good of Lora."

These other worldlings have narrowly averted on their own world the catastrophe of atomic war that wrecked our Haze, they see no longer a worrier race. They have devoted themselves to science in ways that we never knew even in the golden days. Their sciences can be our salvation, if we are only intelligent enough to accept their offered hand of friendship!"

Tels was listening with only half an ear now. A plan was forming in his mind. A plan of escape.

"... remember that the races of both Tars and Lora are sprung from the loins of a single great transplanetic people," the High Superior was saying, "and together they might one day rule the Solar System! Think of it, Tels of Lark! Even the knowledge of interplanetary travel will be ours if we join in brotherhood with Tarsal! All the might of our Temple sciences could not achieve that in the short hours left to us ... but the Tellethian offer is a *suave*! And the only persons they ask is some of the dandy men that can sweep our atmosphere and drain us of our precious water!"

"Think of these things, young in, until next we speak."

The old man sank back, exhausted by his speech and made a sign that the audience was over. He knew somehow that he had failed ... and that other measures were now in order.

III

AN hour before sunrise, Tels was awake and ready for action. He arose and dressed himself, broke his fast on the remnants of his last evening meal, for he dared not guess how long it would be before he saw again. He hanged at the door of his apartment until an attendant appeared, nodding his eyes sleepily.

Tels made a long face. "I—I must see Brother Gork," he demanded, "the Priest who brought me here. I—I feel the need of spiritual guidance."

The attendant, a Temple novice, showed benign pleasure at his words.

"Could I not be of service, my son?"

Tels shook his head. "The words of the High Superior have caused me to re-evaluate the value of my long and useful life. Brother Gork has long been my spiritual father and counselor. I must see him." It was not altogether a lie. The kindly old scientist's words had made him think a bit, in spite of himself. The old man had seemed so sure. And Gork had long been his source of advice and even companionship for a good few hours.

The novice was disappointed, but understanding. He departed to awaken Brother Gork.

Three quarters of an hour of darkness remained when Gork appeared at the door. Tels met him, looking curiously up and down the hall to see that they were alone. How careless these Temple people were with their prisoners!

"Tels, my friend! What is it? Brother Als said that you needed some ..." Gork began.

Tels measured him carefully and swung. With all the power and co-ordination of a soldier's superbly conditioned body behind it, Tels' first sight the Priest on the point of his jaw and knocked him sprawling to the thick carpet. Quickly dropping to his knees, Tels released the fallen man of his two wrists and stand-up. He snatched them to his own harness and looked about for a means of reaching the Priest. Taking the wine bottle from the table, he splashed some of the dark fluid over Gork's face. For a moment, Tels had the feeling that it had all been too easy. But he drove the manuscript from his mind and concentrated on the next steps to his break for freedom.

The young Priest sat up ignoring his jaw properly. There was a reproachful look in his eyes.

"Tels, you can't escape if that's what you intended by striking me. Give me back my weapons!"

Tels smiled wearily. "Oh, no, my good and faithful friend. Now get up. Up I say, or I'll put you where you feel!"

Gork gave him a useful smile. "By the Goddess, I believe you'd do it, too."

"There is a girl here," Tels suggested. "What do you know about her?" If the girl actually were a Tellethian, she would be an invaluable hostage.

"Gul?" Gork looked puzzled.

"Quickly!"

"It's true that there is a girl here, but—"

"Who is she? Why was she brought here?" demanded Tels.

"She was found by one of our patrol squads ... lost in the desert and near dead. They picked her up and brought her here. Since then she has remained ... voluntarily."

Tels gave a short, hard laugh. "You can do better than that, Gork!"

The Priest struggled. "Then why ask me if you don't intend to believe the truth?"

"I'll bear it from her. We are leaving, friend, and she goes with us!"

Gotha charged again. "As you wish, Tels. These seem to be nothing I can do to stop you."

"These lead me to her quarters, and not a sound out of you, do you understand?" Tels prodded the Friar gently with the short-sword.

"But command me, lord," murmured Gotha unobediently. He picked himself up off the floor. Tels snatched the cloak from his cloak and wrapped it around the gleaming blade of the short-sword, with keeping the point at the base of the Friar's spine.

"Don't force me to use this, Gotha," he bared in the other's ear.

Gotha shook his head slowly and led the way off down the corridor. The early hour was well chosen, for the whole covering edifice seemed to be deserted. Somewhere, Tels felt, no departed. The whole magnificent metropolis that was Doffin seemed to sleep serenely under its mantle of invisibility.

In a tight silence, Gotha led Tels until they stood before a closed door near the ground level.

"Open it," commanded Tels.

"I have no key," Gotha protested.

Cowering under his breath, Tels tried the doorknob. Then his surprise, it gave easily and the door swung open. Tels lifted his sword, half-expecting a trap, but no attack came from the darkness beyond the portal. He shoved Gotha through and closed the door, the dark closing as around them.

"A light," whispered Tels.

Gotha reached a switch on the wall and light flooded the room. On the guest bed near the far wall, the girl sat, bedclothes held to her breast, staring at them curiously. It was strange, thought Tels, that she showed no fear. And stranger still was the fact that her face was masked now in a bag-like contraption made of the same material covered as the purser he remembered seeing her wear. It was stretched tight by internal pressure that apparently came from a small cylinder at her bedside and connected to the mask by a flexible metal tube.

Some new and strange addition, wondered Tels? It was not unknown upon Larar for some to resort to the use of narcosis, what with the frequent warfare plaguing the nerves and the over-present spectre of death hanging over the whole planet. Tels himself had traced gas from a similar contraption on one of his hedonistic visits . . .

Whatever the drug was, he had seen her without the bag-like helmet in the Central Temple Adoration which account for her seeming silence that he so well remembered from the previous day.

There was no sign of alarm about her now! He stared at her, his breath catching in his throat.

Beast woman!

NEAR at hand, her beauty was almost a living, magnetic thing. Her hair gleamed, and her skin was pearly translucent, like porcelain alabaster. The refraction of the light through the transparent mask surrounded her face with a glowing nimbus that made Tels think of the solar-graphic zones of the Goddess. Her eyes were full, almost catlike, and her great dark eyes looked at him quizzically but unfazed.

"There is no time to explain," he said rapidly. "We are leaving this place. Now."

She nodded without surprise, as though she had known exactly what he was going to say.

Tels motioned for her to get up. For a moment she waited, but when Tels showed no sign of turning around, she slipped out of bed and covered herself quickly with the blouse and harness that lay on a chair nearby. As she did so, she slipped the transparent mask off and, even as Tels watched her appreciatively, he could see the shadow of health fade from her face. A pained look appeared, and a thin line of blue formed around her mouth. She seemed short of breath.

The girl adjusted her harness about her, making sure that the contents of each pouch were there. Then she slipped herself into the transparent jumper and reached for the mask.

Tels caught her arm. "The mask stays here."

The girl looked displeased. She looked to Gotha for aid. The young Friar moved to intervene, but Tels motioned him aside. "No," Tels spoke sharply. "You may have to fly or swim . . ." He paused. "You can fly one, can't you?"

The girl nodded. "I have learned to fly one," she said. "But my mask . . . I need it!"

The girl's face looked stricken at the thought of leaving her precious mask behind. But Tels hardened himself. He could not let this escape be ruled by her unpredictable actions. Besides, he had seen her in the Temple without the mask, so it was not a matter of life and death for her. "The mask stays," Tels said firmly.

For a long moment there was something like sheer terror on the girl's face. Then, as though by an effort of the will, she composed herself and nodded her agreement. Tels was forced to admire her courage.

Gotha seemed to realize that any comment that he might make concerning the mask or the girl Tels would not believe, since for the moment they found themselves enemies. He decided to maintain a discreet silence and hope for the best.

"And now, friend Gotha," ordered Tels, "lead us to the landing field and get us on our feet. It is a long way back to the capital and I have no intention of trying to make it on fifth-back, not so long as your Temple Guards are so handy with the sword."

Like a bemused desperado, Gotha led the way out of the building and through the dark streets. No beam of light now penetrated the

light shield surrounded the Temple City, and Tels found the protecting darkness much to his liking. The dozeey guards at the gate looked curiously at the trio, but, recognizing Brother Gerls, made no effort to stop them.

Soon they were at the landing field and Gerls had run out the very air-ship that had brought Tels to the Temple City. Tels slipped into the forward cockpit and tested the jet. It came readily to life under his practiced hands, and he rejoined Gerls and the girl in beside him.

"My love," the girl said almost pleadingly. He had the man-gas within easy reach and named to Gerls. "Not that I don't trust you, my old friend," he said with a thin smile, "but I will feel much more comfortable if you are well-behaved while I am flying."

Gerls made no reply. He merely shrugged and wriggled himself in his cockpit as best he could.

Tels glanced around at the sleeping field. Far across the landing area lights were blinking on. The sound of the air-ship jet had awakened the air-wardens, and soon they would be giving the alarm. But there was no chance for anyone to stop them now. Almost desperately, Tels shoved the throttle forward on the quadrant and the jet roared. With a humming of runners, the sled moved swiftly across the red sand and into the air.

Zooming low over the buildings at the far end of the field, the sled drove on into the blackness. Then with breathtaking suddenness, it slashed through the light shield and the lights of Durkas flashed while the heavens came alive with the early morning stars.

Tels pointed the sled's blunt nose at the heartily beautiful morning star that was Tels riding low on the eastern horizon. Presently, he leveled the craft and reduced his speed to maximum cruising power. Just skimming the reddish dunes, they sped onward, into the sudden glory of the desert dawn. . . .

IV

AT noon, Tels took time to search the sled's storage locker. Turning the controls over to the girl, he crawled across the base deck into the rear cockpit. Most likely they were used for over-desert flying carried emergency repairs and weapons for the use of anyone unfortunate enough to need them. In the matter of weapons, he was doomed to disappointment, for the particular sled carried none. But there was a small patch of concentration, and a flask of protein water. Tels pattered the pocket in his arm and turned to start back toward the forward cockpit.

He stopped short. Down his vantage point behind her, Tels could see that the girl had taken a small cube from her pouch and was holding it to her ear. For several seconds she sat

quite still, as though listening, then she turned the cube, held it to her lips for a moment, and returned it to the pouch at her belt.

He scrambled back to his place beside her, demanding, "That cube. What was it?"

"Cube?"

"Is there," Tels reached the pouch that hung at her side.

"You must have been mistaken. There is no cube," she said. "Perhaps you saw me checking my compass. . . ." She reached into the pouch and drew out a small magnetic compass in a square metal case. "You see?"

Tels frowned. It was possible that he had been mistaken. . . . but he was inwardly almost certain that the compass he held in his hand was not the cube he had seen the girl using. For a moment he toyed with the idea of searching her, but reconsidered. The sled would not reach the ground again until it landed in the capital near the Grand Canal. There was no possible way that the girl could harm him or interfere with his plans now. And perhaps the cube was a happy-gas meter. . . .

He looked suspiciously into the girl's face. She looked as though she could use some relaxation. The blue about her mouth and the tight, pinched look in her face seemed to have worsened since leaving Durkas. She usually looked ill. She gave him a weak smile, and he decided to question her no more for the present.

Opening the pocket of concentration, he offered her one and passed the pack to Gerls. Then he gripped the water flask around, cushioning them to drink sparingly.

As the hours passed and the sun began to slide down toward the western hills, Tels began to worry about their navigation. Not knowing the exact location of the Temple City, he could only guess at the proper course for the capital, and the low clouds made navigating very difficult. Tels decided to climb higher and see if he could not catch a glimpse of the Grand Canal or some other familiar landmark. He moved the sled upward slightly and tilted the throttle forward, sending the sled upward toward the nebula sky.

The girl was looking down over the side at the desert nothing by. Though there was nothing to be seen but sun-red sand, scattering about the dunes were rounded to places low.

Tels touched her arm to attract her attention. "We've been together almost all day and I don't even know your name," he said. "I am Tels of Lart. . . ."

The girl smiled back at him. "My name is Leslie Kerr," she returned.

Leslie, Tels named the name on his tongue. It had a foreign flavor. An exotic and lovely as the girl herself. And two names Leslie and Kerr. Tels found the last hard to pronounce. Now, he wondered, why two names? She must be a person of consequence; in her home land

Tells thought of the cube. Perhaps a signaling device. A thought struck him: The Temple? No, it was not likely. A signaling device remained. He recalled vaguely how simple the escape had been. Too simple. Was this girl an agent of the Temple? Or had his first suspicion—that she was a Tellurian—been right?

"Tells," Gorka broke the silence, "can you tell me where we are?"

Tells shook her head.

"Why are we dumbing?" Lorka asked. She looked afraid. "Please—I-I asked you to—"

Tells sat her off almost sharply. "I know what you have asked me. But we must not hope enough to have a look around us. To be lost out here would mean the end of all of us; an unpleasant end, too. It will only be for a short time."

Lorka dropped into an uneasy silence. Higher and higher the sky-disk climbed until at last Tells leveled the aircraft off and began a systematic search of the horizon to the east. There was no sign of the gateway that edged the great waterway.

"Tells!" Gorka's shout cut across the roaring of the wind. "Look! Look at her!"

TELLS started to look at the girl. The strange reality from which the suffered had chosen this moment to strike her down. For a moment Tells was shocked. Never had he seen a happy-go-lucky event in this way! The thin line of blue that surrounded her mouth was deeper, relaxing her lips and spreading to bring her whole face into smile. Her eyes were closed and her breath came in large rasping gasps. Gorka was cradling her in his arms, closing her eyes and trying to force water through her slack lips. He looked up at Tells, shouting frantically!

"Down! Down, Tells! We have to get her down now!"

For a moment Tells did not understand, then he realized what was meant and showed the sky-disk over into a steep dive. The girl was suffering from oxygen-starvation. She seemed to suffer from it chronically, and if she did not reach denser air soon she would die! That was the reason she had feared altitude and had begged that she died be kept low.

And Gorka knew!

Suddenly the whole impossible picture of the escape flashed before Tells' eyes, and a net, feeling swept over her.

In a panic Gorka whipped out a transmitter and began to shout into it. Fearing the girl's death, his instructions were forgotten and he began broadcasting for help. Tells stared for a moment, not understanding. The radio device used by the Temple were unknown to him, but he knew with an immediate certainty that Gorka was making contact with the Temple Guard back in Corbin. The runner he had heard of the Temple's methods of quick communication seemed to click in his ears and fury took him

by the throat. Why hadn't Gorka used the radio before? Was it because the whole escape was a monstrous hoax, engineered by the Temple for the purpose of somehow shattering the Maths and what it stood for? The answer was a blinding, irrefragable yes!

And to what action was Lorka Kurr involved?

In this fury, Tells could not think clearly enough to guess. He had the helpless feeling of great wheels and all spinning and whirling for some dully unknown purpose . . .

He watched the transmitter from Gorka's hand and observed it over the side. Such anger killed him. The Temple must at that very moment know their exact location from that self-talk signal that Gorka had sent in his panic for Lorka! What a feat he had been with his escape and his cleverness! How they must be laughing at him back in Corbin!

"May the Goddess damn you!" he cried at Gorka.

"You fool!" the Priest retorted, his round face livid. "You've killed her with your stupid plotting and your . . ."

"She will live," snapped Tells. He knew how to deal with anger. Long campaigns in the air forces of the Lunar had taught him. But the rest of it . . . the duty to be sealed with Gorka . . . that was something else!

His fury made him careless, and as the sled touched the sand, it almost over turned, skidding and careening over the red sand until at last it came to rest at a crazy angle on the slope of a low dune. The jet coughed and died, its nozzle jammed with sand.

Quickly, Tells lifted the monstrous girl in his arms and laid her on the sand at full length. For just a moment he wondered at her weight . . . she seemed almost twice as heavy as she should be for her size . . .

Then the urgency of the moment was upon him, and he look at her side, placed his lips on hers and began forcing air into her lungs with his own. Presently she stirred and Tells knew with a feeling of great relief that she would recover.

He wrapped her in Gorka's cloak, for the sun was sinking low and the night chill was already in the air.

Then he turned to face the Priest, memory reliving his fury. He caught the man by his neck and pulled him close. "Now, Gorka, you'll tell me the whole story—all of it!" His voice was icy with suppressed anger.

But Gorka's eyes were not on him. Instead they seemed centered on something above and behind him. The Priest's features contorted with a sudden fear, and he twisted around, pulling Tells with him.

"Look out!"

THE warning came too late. The sudden twist had moved Tells' life, but the flashing missile caught him in the shoulder. A searing pain blazed

through Tels, and he spun around, staggered by the impact of the thrown short-sword that had pierced his shoulder.

Through a dancing haze of agony, Tels could see a ragged line of naked men and women on the crest of the dune. Each carried a short-sword and a long-sword, and the bodies were filthy and covered with dark hair.

Goels!

A black woman lifted her arm and gripped her short-sword. In quick in the next now Leslie Kerr's poisonous body. Tels threw himself on the girl, protecting her body with his own. With pain flowing through him from the blade that still impaled him, he forced one of his swords and his man-gun, throwing them to Goels. Their personal quarrel was forgotten in the heat of the attack.

Blood was flowing out of him. Gritting his teeth to keep from crying out, Tels retained the imbedded sword free. With a sobbing moan he dropped it to the sand. He fought back the blackness that threatened to engulf him. Goels must not fight alone!

The Priest had sought the shelter of the altar and was shooting blindly at the spectrum on the crest. Already he had succeeded for three men and a woman, and several of their companions, not knowing or caring that the man-gun did not kill, had withdrawn from the fray to butcher the fallen ones into long strips of bloody meat, which they scooped hungrily into their mouths.

Tels felt Leslie stir, and he struggled to his feet and helped her to the sled.

With surprising quickness the slumped herself to the recollection of battle. She took a peculiar looking pistol from her pouch and leveled it at the spectrum.

A sharp report burst from the weapon in the girl's hand and, on the crest of the dune, a Goels woman shrieked and pushed to the sand. Twelve times this process was repeated, and Tels began to have hopes that the battle would be won before he himself collapsed from loss of blood.

It was a vain hope. After the twelfth explosion, the weapon fell silent, and the strange performance was over.

There was a brief lull during which the Gaski hunched their dead, and Goels tried frantically to start the dead motor of the sled. Then the Gaski began to close in, and Goels and Tels both were forced to leave the sled and advance to meet them. Leslie stayed near the aircraft, dipping frantically at the jammed jet.

To Tels, his sword seemed suddenly very, very heavy. He reached Goels on the shoulder. "At least . . . we'll die . . . friends . . . together," he muttered.

Goels's face convulsed with grief. "Friends . . . always, Tels. I never felt any other way," he said simply.

There was no time for more. The Gaski were

upon them—a savage, shrieking horde of villainous beasts, hungering for the taste of human flesh.

Tels seemed to stand still. Tels thrust and slashed, cut and parried bravely. Pain was his only reality. Pain appeared before him, and vanished into gouts of red as his blade found marks. Gradually his strength failed and finally he dropped to his knees, still holding one feebly with his weapon.

Suddenly the onrush of battle was counter-whipped by the jolky, unseen backing of an attack yet Leslie had cleared the monster! Shrieked and fearful of the jet flame, the Gaski slunk back nervously. In that moment, Goels half-dropped, half-carried Tels to the sled. Tels could feel the movement of the sled as it coasted heavily across the sand, trying to gain flying speed. He heard Leslie gasp:

"It's no use, Goels. It can't lift the sled as is with the jet half-dropped."

Goels's voice came sharp and clear. "Then I try. Take him on. That's the important thing. He must be made to act . . ."

Tels realized with agonizing helplessness that since the sled could not lift three persons Goels was remaining Goels was remaining behind. To face the Gaski!

He tried to cry out his protest, but he was too weak to do more than moan.

"Can you find the way?" Goels asked the girl.

"I have maps. There's the transmitter, too. I can come in on D-F from that when about you?"

"Never mind me . . . remember, the fate of my world goes with you . . . and with Tels. Explain that to him . . . after he knows . . ."

Tels heard the motor speed up again, and he felt the bumping of the runners on the sand. But he was unconscious before the sled lifted into the air . . .

V

FOR what seemed a long time, Tels floated in shocking darkness. Tels spun in this void—depth of five stories the surface of his mind and it was not physical pain alone. Two thoughts tortured him constantly. He had killed the Madies and he had deserted his friends, leaving him to die at the hands of the crueler sub-men.

Again swept by in that timeless, timeless darkness, and at last Tels opened his eyes.

For a moment he thought that he was back in the Central Temple of Darkness, but as his eyes focused more clearly, he saw that he was in a small, neatly bare room. The walls were white, and one of them seemed to curve gently overhead until it met the flat plane of the ceiling.

A cool hand was stroking his forehead, and

Tella turned to meet the eyes of Leslie Kerr. She sat at his bedside wondrously, and somehow he knew that she had been there for a long time.

Her clothing was different than he remembered. Her harness was gone. Now, her supple figure was clad in a straight tunic of dark mottled cloth that hung from her shoulders to the middle of her thighs, caught at her small waist by a laced belt. Her dark hair was swept back from her face, exposing her small, often ears. There was a look of health and vitality about her that was missing when Tella recalled her condition in the str-dold.

"Why . . . what change is this?" he asked.

Leslie smiled. "No magic," she said. "Only some doctoring me."

Tella drew a deep breath. It was true. The air was different . . . and wonderful. Victory fled him and with it came a thousand questions. Where was he? What was this place? What had happened after the fight on the desert? and the question he most wanted answered—what of Gorki?

Leslie had a waiting hand over his lips and cautioned him against speaking his new found strength too proudly. He was healing, she told him, and within a very few days he would be able to go up and around. At that time, all his questions would be answered. This last she told him with something like reluctance in her voice.

Hardly, wherever they were, Leslie was at home here.

The days passed almost too swiftly. Strange men came and went, giving him odd medicines and dressing his wound. All his questions were patiently avoided. Yet their concern for a stranger was confusing to Tella. By the code that Tella had lived his six heads with, a stranger was ipso facto an enemy. According to that code he had lived and had become a great soldier and a high officer of the Learr of Learr himself. Now here were strangers mending him with kindness . . . and their kindness was striking at the roots of everything he had ever believed. And there was Leslie. She remained with him constantly, tending him and comforting him with her presence. Tella felt himself losing his heart to this exotic girl with her kindness and her breathtaking beauty.

FOUR days passed and then his confinement was over. He was able to rise from his hospital cot. His harness was brought to him, and even his weapons if proof were needed. Tella thought, the act of returning his weapons proved that he was among friends. And true friends they must be, for they had mended him and fed him, and he could not forget that his friend had been willing to remain behind alone to face the Gorki so that he, Tella, might be brought here. And that recalled the burning question mark. Why?

When he had dressed himself, Leslie came

into the room. Her face was somber. "Tella," she began, "I have something that I must tell you before you leave this room. Believe me, it is not easy. You are, I . . . I have not been honest with you . . . Not that I have lied. Believe me, I haven't. But . . ." She broke off momentarily in confusion. Her face was flushed. "I have let you mislead yourself, and that's very like lying, isn't it?" She did not wait for a reply, but rushed on. "Now I have to stand by and watch you find out who and what I am. Oh, believe me, I have no wish to hurt you or your people, Tella. I couldn't . . . now . . . because I . . . I . . ." She bit her lips. "All this is necessary. You had to be convinced, you see, because of your great influence with the Learr . . ." She gave a short, nervous laugh. "All this isn't making very much sense, is it?"

"No," replied Tella, puzzled.

"You know by now that you were wicked into coming here. It was all planned by us and by the Temple . . ."

Tella felt the blood drain from his face. He knew exactly what was coming next. The whole incredible picture was clear.

"Oh, Tella," cried Leslie. "Please understand! Gorki understood . . . and he gave his life so that we could make you see! Can't you see what I am trying to tell you? Can't you see that if you help us we can bring life back to Learr? And that if you won't, it might mean ages of endless warfare? Tella . . . try . . ."

Tella of Learr stared. It all came flooding back to him. All the tiny, unremembered pieces of the puzzle. The mask back in Dardis! A response! Her need for oxygen . . . the assassin that attacked her down in the str-dold . . . the rich air of this room! Her weight . . . the greater density of a heavy gravity planet's evolution! Alone, alone!

Leslie Kerr could feel the hammer ring between them and she cried out against it. Tears streaked her face, and even that added to Tella's sense of alienage. Leslianna did not weep. The water in their bodies was far too precious for that. It was all to gratitude! He, the former leader of the Mithia, beholden to the invaders for his very life!

Then the shock began to wear off, and he tried to function more clearly. This place with its sloping wall was a compartment in the Tellurian apartment, that much was now obvious. Yet they had mended him within it . . . armed. And they had been kind to him, they had mended him back to health after the Gorki's wound almost killed him. Why? It was not enough that he had great influence with the Learr. He had had the feeling that they liked him. Could it be, he wondered, that the whole basic philosophy of the Mithia was in error? The Temple spoke of mighty Tellurian power. Could it actually do what the High Sorcerer of Dardis claimed? Redden the planet and give it hope again?

And there was Leslie. In that moment of astonishment, Tola knew with a distinct shock that Tefluma or not, he loved her. Tola of Lura, peer of the ancient nobles of Lura, member of the doted, anti-Tellurian Malda, was in love with an alien woman! Creature of another world—different and strange—and yet he loved her! Standing there, watching her turn—come down her cheeks, he felt his heart contract, and he knew that she had won.

"Please, Tola—my Tola—let me show that we can be friends!" she cried.

Tola stared at her. "Friends?" he asked dubiously.

Leslie took a step nearer, her eyes suddenly wide, almost afraid. It came to Tola in a blinding flash of insight that she too was feeling the soul-revealing conflict of love for an alien creature. To her Tola was the enemy, the outlander.

Then like the snapping of a steel wire, the barrier was broken, and she was in his arms, securing his kisses with an almost desperate abandon. . . .

THE Tellurian camp was a revelation to Tola. Guided by Leslie and a group of Tellurian scientists, he beheld machines such as had not existed on the surface of Lura for ten thousand years. Here, among the open, presented domes of the camp were the end-products of all the sciences the Temple had culched from the last books of the ancients.

Power was drawn from the destruction of sub-atomic particles of matter by a mysterious process the scientist referred to as "fusion," and Tola found to his surprise that Leslie was not a nihilist as he had supposed, but something called a "metallurgist." These terms meant nothing to him, but the working activity of the camp and the manner of her way in which miracles were daily performed made him begin to understand what the High Superior had meant when he said that together the moon of Terra and Lura might one day rule the solar system. The machines and the magnificent, graceful projectiles that was the spaceship fixed Tola's imagination.

If any doubt remained in his mind, it was shattered irrevocably when Leslie showed him the mining operations. Then he had begun only on an experimental basis, the Tellurians ready way of turning themselves before permanence to man was greeted by the Lura. But, even on a small scale, what Tola saw stirred him more deeply than had any of the other wondrous things he had been shown.

Since the deserts of Lura were almost pure iron sands, it was explained to him that they were the result of the ubiquitous man's propensity for eating with oxygen. The result, after many years, was that the air was actually eating away. By the marvelous miracle of Tellurian chemistry, the iron oxide was broken down into

its constituent elements. This resulted in a stream of iron liquid, and . . . here oxygen!

Tola was quick to realize what this process would mean to Lura over a period of time if it was made universal. Great quantities of the precious oxygen would be released into the air to breathe it, and later to combine with the huge amounts of hydrogen in Lura's atmosphere to form water!

The Tellurians had in fact already set up a pilot plant where oxygen and hydrogen were mixed to make the water they needed for their own purposes. Part of it was used for drinking and bathing, and part was used for padding the iron coats before it was passed through the separation process. Great pressure hoses washed the atmosphere from the furnace aside even as Tola watched, astounded. Never had a Luranian seen pressure water treated so carefully, but with a great effort he was able to achieve himself finally to an awareness of physical water, and the sight of great amounts of it changing the desert to rich soil shocked him less and less as the days passed.

Only two thoughts marred Tola's happiness during these days spent in the camp. First the thought of Gadi's fate continued with him always, and he realized that his friend's sacrifice should not be for nothing. And, second, there was the Malda. Now, with Prince Brand at its head, it was more than ever a threat to the safety of the people from the third planet, to himself, to the Lura and by extension to the world of Lura itself.

Tola realized that he must return immediately to the capital and lay his findings before the Lura. Only in that way could the danger of the Malda be removed. With the safe-conduct from the supreme ruler conferred publicly, the Malda would not dare to attack the camp.

The air-aid was repaired, and Tola made ready to leave the following morning over the protests of Leslie and the camp medical staff, who contended that his wound was not yet sufficiently healed.

But Tola's campaign had come too late. Even as the sled was loaded, a shout from the watchtower brought the whole camp out into the streets. With beating heart Tola heard the words of the camp guard. The Malda had come, and the camp found itself surrounded.

VI

TELLA hurried with Leslie to the watchtower and his startled eyes looked out over the surrounding desert. Fully five thousand Gadi men and women surrounded them, led by at least five hundred well-armed and well-mounted warriors. Tola recognized many of them as his former comrades of the Malda. And Prince Brand was there. Tola felt a hot wave of hate for the man.

Thus far, they had made no move to attack, and that in itself showed the characteristic lack

of Brand's leadership. With a force of fifty-five hundred fighting men against an even two hundred poorly-armed men and women, mostly elderly women, Brand still chose to proceed with caution but the unexpected defeat him . . .

Tela smiled. The unexpected!

He had his mind harken back to the stories the older Temple Priests told of the mythical coming of the Water Goddess. And he thought of the bruiser he had read dealing with the forgotten secret of weather on Luan . . .

Quickly he called a meeting of all the department heads. Leadership fell on his shoulders like a cloak, for among all these learned men and women he was the only warrior.

One woman suggested that all the personnel of the camp move into the specialties and that they lift the craft into the air, spraying the attackers with the deadly radioactive exhaust gases. But the ship's navigators warned that this quickly. There was fuel enough only for the return flight to Terra when not the two planets came into conjunction. Moreover, such a move would destroy the camp and all its machinery, negating the entire purpose of the expedition.

It was then that Tela stepped forward with his plan. The Tellurians seemed doubtful that it would work, but Lonic who had been among the Laurans more than the rest of them, convinced them that they could lose nothing by trying.

"Tela is of Luan," she said to them, "and he knows the ways and beliefs of his people. I, for one, think that his plan is our only hope. Cornered as we are, and by savage fighting men and women, our only chance to live. It saved our lives before, and can again!"

When the technicians had left to modify the necessary equipment, Tela summoned the non-armed able-bodied men. Arming them with the few Tellurian powder-runs that were available and with whatever cutting weapons came to hand, he made ready to lead them out to meet the attackers. There was needed Tela and his resource-rich, make-shift company determined to gain this time.

He motioned his men near the main gate to the camp and walked slowly out toward the attacking apaches, twice aware that at last Prince Brand had him at a real disadvantage.

Knowing that to convince these caste-ridden humans and savage cannibals that the attack should not be launched would be next to impossible, Tela evolved a strategy that might satisfy of Luan had developed a very strict code duclo. As it was among most warrior civilizations, "honor" or "face" were of the utmost importance. He himself, by disappearing on the eve of the Makin's planned attack, had lost face. Now, he resolved to turn this fact into a weapon against his apaches.

"Red Brand, there!" he hailed. "Come forward!"

Prince Brand squinted across the distance to see if he could recognize the speaker. Slowly, recognition came, and with it a tolerant satisfaction. This was better than he could have hoped for!

"So it is my Lord Tela returned from the realm of the Goddess to guide our hand against the invaders!" he intoned. "Come! Join us, Humanian phantoms. We are about to complete the work you so nobly began the night you decided not to risk yourself!"

FOR a moment there was a silence among the members of the Makin, and then the laughter started. It was what Tela had expected. It was silent, better laughing for one who had failed the warrior's code. To these men he was a coward. Even the naked savages laughed, though they did not understand the reason for it.

Tela's face rose under the scolding mirth, but he knew with some satisfaction that all the palaver was taking up precious minutes, reducing the attack that he could hold at bay only with his wit.

"Yes, Brand," said Tela slowly and distinctly, "are a usurping regime. Your mother was a slaver and your father a Gosh! slave of questionable memory. You are a coward and a pondering licker!"

A sudden gust settled on the armed ranks and Tela continued with his ranting monologue.

"I challenge you to fight me here and now—so that I can strip the honors from your petty carous and throw it to the wind! Refuse, and I will come and get you!"

A low roar of rage rose from the ranks of the apaches. Never had a high-born prince been so grossly and deliberately insulted. According to their code, there was only one possible answer, and they awaited it with eagerness. Brand must fight.

But Prince Brand was no fool. He knew Tela for a swindler, and he strongly suspected some sort of trickery from the non-armed camp. Still, he knew that Tela must be punished and before the troops or he held over them would fail. It could be done without placing himself in jeopardy for the role of a glibest pretent.

He turned to an equester. "Bring him to me. Dead or alive."

Tela heard, and gave an insulting laugh. "Fretfully dead, eh, Brand?"

The equester looked pained. He turned to Brand. "Sir, he has offered a challenge. It would be a very bad form to . . ."

"Bring him!" Brand snapped truthily. "If you are afraid, take a company . . ."

The officer affirmed. "I am not afraid, although others are!" He wheeled his steed and moved toward Tela.

"Get back, Captain," ordered Tela. "My quarrel is not with you!"

"Falls him down!" called Brand.

The officer unbalanced his lance and led it in vain. Lurching at it Tels, he dug his booted heels into the air's flanks and dashed across the sand, leaving him in the middle.

Tels stood braced and, just as the animal came abreast of him, he stepped aside, catching the tip of the lance under his arm and whirling. The movement of the weapon disbalanced the officer and he tumbled from the saddle to sprawl on the sand. With a scuffed howl of rage, the man was on his feet and upon Tels, but his fury made him careless. Tels' sword flashed out and the point found the officer's sword arm, piercing it deeply and ending the encounter with a flourish.

Tels turned to face the attackers once again. "Now Brand," he roared, "will you come out to do your own dying? Or will you send another Lucky to take the next wound for you?"

Brand's heavy feet clattered. For answer he raised his hands to the heavens.

"Atschi!"

The last words forward like a great army were, shrieking and waving Tels stood apart. An attack he had been expecting, and even the possibility of the Madks finally taking the camp had occurred to him. But that fifty-five hundred roaring madmen would attack one man was more than he had prepared himself for.

Death seemed a certainty, and a flaming image of Lucha swept across his mind. He lifted his hands upward and murmured a prayer to the Goddess.

It was answered. The sun came like a pit from heaven. From the apertures of the camp's porous stone doors there poured a great effluence of pure, cold water. It rose in a graceful curve high into the air and spilled down to bath the red sand into a mirror and spray the attackers.

Tels himself was caught up in the wonder of it. And the effect on the Madks' fighting force of Gush's was nothing short of miraculous. The charging savages pulled up, torn like to the sky in mass amazement. Then came fear—shrieking, mad, desperate terror! Ring was falling where no man had fallen for two thousand hands. The Goddess had opened up the flood gates of heaven and the staff of the sky was falling down on a sinful Lauer! Dropping their weapons, they fled out into the desert—away from the sacred place that the Goddess had chosen to enlighten! And, in their flight, they carried the mounted nobles of the Madks, crying, shouting, trying to regroup their shattered cohorts.

Tels stood in the downpour, his body tingling to the touch of the precious water. He was thinking not that this mark of Teflumen goddess had saved his life, rather he was thinking of Lauer and what this could mean to the planet. The desert could be conquered, the world could be redeemed!

Presently, the water stopped and a Teflumen from his company ran forward to shout: "Tels! Look there! Aircraft!"

Tels looked skyward, and the door to the future seemed to flash open in his mind. Fully two hundred air-crafts were bearing rapidly toward them. The Madks again . . . more of them?

Tels looked out into the desert. The mounted force had abandoned the attempt to regroup the demoralized Gushs, but it had formed into a phalanx and was returning to the attack.

Automatically, but without real hope, Tels measured his men into extended order. They were caught between two forces, helpless between the well-mounted Madks and the airborne contingent. The army of a caught at his breast pitifully. It was better dead to the just as the bank of a golden age . . . a golden age that would never come now.

Now he could make out Brand's face far to the east of the mounted column. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw that the dead were almost upon them, too. Tels braced himself for the attack.

Then, with a roar of jets, the air armada purred low over his head and began discharging warriors onto the equally narrow strip of sand between him and the Madks. For a moment Tels was stunned by the strangeness of the newcomers . . . and then his astonished eyes caught the gleam of the device blazoned on the grounded ships. It was the Sward and Aegis of the Temple!

With a glad cry he leaped forward to greet the Temple Guardians. Seated from the brink of disaster, the camp now needed in a surfeit of friendly winners! The Madks halted in confusion and immediately moved off to cut off their escape.

Tels wanted the ranks of the Temple troops for some explanation of this amazing miracle . . . and his eyes found a familiar figure. It was battered and bandaged but unmistakably . . . Gush!

He caught the priest by the arm and spun him around with a shout. The familiar round face coincided with pleasure and he threw his free arm around Tels.

"You've headed, Tels!" he roared. "And in name they don't see!" he added significantly. "I see you leading the advance toward the attack!"

"I've been a thick-headed fool, Gush! But you . . . how are you here? I—"

"You thought me sent for these Gushs back on the desert that night?"

Tels nodded.

The Priest laughed. "By the Goddess! I thought you were going to get up and give us trouble that night! I suppose I should be thankful for your wound. You never would have left us otherwise!"

"But, how did you . . ." Tels began.

"The Temple takes care of its own, Tels, my friend," said Garb. "We were being followed at a distance all the way from Dorcas by a guardship. Of course, when you threw my comrade over the side, they lost us. But you were the one who had to be concerned about those Tellurians. So I stayed. There were a few bad moments . . . once or twice I thought the Guards had me sold, but the guardship was searching and it found me before the brass could flush me off. Since then, we have been standing by at Dorcas, waiting for the Maldis to move."

"And here you are, thank the Goddess!" burst out Tels.

They stood surrounded by Temple Guardians and Tellurians watching the air-side break up the air-mounted force of the Maldis. The back of the assault was broken. Rulerless animals swarmed about wildly through the confusion, and people were pouring out of the camp to greet their liberators.

"Who led them?" asked Garb, indicating the silver nobles.

Tels looked around for Prince Brand, but he was nowhere to be seen. Then his sharp eyes caught a cloud of dust moving rapidly across the desert. It would be Brand. He came, of all things, to throw over the battle-to-death code of the first sign of opposition.

With an oath, Tels caught up a stick and swung into the middle. "There!" he shouted to Garb, pointing. "If he escapes the Maldis will turn again!" Tels kicked the stick sideways, and the animal plunged off in pursuit of the fleeing scamp.

As full speed the stick carried Tels out into the desert. For half an hour there was no loss or gain, Prince Brand's animal holding its lead tenaciously. Already, the Prince had turned to see that he was being followed. But Tels' horse was faster, and now began to narrow the distance.

They were well away from the camp when Tels caught up. Riding up, he cut across the path of Brand's animal, forcing it to break stop. Brand skidded wildly at first, but Tels parried and dodged in under the other's paws. Then, looking his knee under that of the struggling Prince, he heaved upward and dislodged him from the saddle so that he tumbled to the sand.

Tels roared on the stick and leaped to the ground. Brand was already on his feet, sword in hand, his face contorted with fear and rage. Tels advanced steadily, bare coursing through him.

If Brand had been fearless before, he was not now when his life depended on his skill and cunning. Even as their swords crossed, Tels knew that his work was not yet far from. There was no sound but the clash of steel and the labored breathing of the two men as they locked in combat. For almost a quarter of an hour they fought without appreciable gain or other

side. But Tels was younger, and the strike was beginning to tell on Brand. He knew that he must win quickly or die.

Stepping back, Brand smashed the helmet from his head and threw it full at Tels' face. Tels' sword made a glittering arc in the sunlight as it caught the metal and leaped a mile. But for the moment he left himself unprotected, and Brand lunged in to seek his point near Tels' neck thigh.

Tels staggered but did not fall; the parried wound sang him, and Brand, thinking that he had scored a killing blow, hunched a furious attack. Tels backed steadily across the sand, leaving a trail of blood. He measured his pace carefully and, when Brand passed to catch his breath, Tels turned at his head. Brand's blade came jerking up to meet the thrust, and Tels staggered, whirled his point under Brand's guard and lunged with all his force.

The blade sank deep into Brand's chest. Tels stopped back and slipped it free. The scampode stood for a moment, staring unbelieveingly at the wound in his chest that bubbled a bloody froth. His arms stiffened and the sword he held dropped suddenly to the sand. Very deliberately, he sank to his knees, still staring at the wound, then he pitched forward into the sand face-downward. He was dead.

Tels caught his stick wearily and mounted. He turned back toward the camp without another look at Brand. All the fury and excitement of battle was washed out of him, and he felt very tired.

The gentle movement of the air's gun helped to steady him. He rode slowly along, looking out over the wastes of the Great Red Desert, eveninging the land as it would be one day green and fertile, close under a sky no longer smoky clear, but blue with clouds that would bring soft rains and saving life from the land.

He topped the final rise and before him was the Tellurian camp and the tall, beautiful prospect of the uplands. The shadows of sunset Lauran and Tellurians were shooting and cheering the end of the struggle.

Now the future seemed assured. Tels promised himself that the future of the Tellurians on Lear would be one with his own. And some day, he thought, perhaps he would see Terra—or even the stars!

It would be a great task, he reflected, this changing the face and fate of a dying world. But together the redemption and the redemption could work a cure. Tels knew somehow that the thing would be done.

A figure detached itself from the crowd and ran towards him, calling his name. It was Leche. With a questioning gaze he made his way toward him. The door to the future opened, and he stepped through without looking back.

THE END

FLOWERING EVIL

by MARGARET ST. CLAIR

*Like all her other plants from far-off worlds,
Aunt Amy hoped the Venusian Rambler would
win a prize. It hoped so, too*

CAPTAIN BJORNSSON shook a grizzled head. "I never saw a plant I liked the looks of less," he said. "I don't know how he got it through the planetary plant quarantine. You take my advice, Amy, and watch out for it." He took another of the little pots and positions down the square old lattice planter, and he was appreciative.

Mrs. Danvers sniffed. "I don't know what you're driving at," she said coldly, "or why you're so prejudiced against my poor little Rambler. You know perfectly well that Robert would never send me anything the least bit dangerous."

Captain Bjornsson passed with another snicker half-way to his lips and looked at her. "Wouldn't send you anything dangerous?" he continued. "Why, Amy, have you forgotten how your face was swollen up for two weeks from that tree coming to smother you? The doctor said it was a contact poison worse than venereal, and he tried to get you to go to the hospital. What about the time that cancer from the Blue Desert went to smother me, and I spent thirty-six hours picking spores out of you? What about—" Mrs. Danvers gave a warning snarl.

"Well, all right," Bjornsson said. "I know how fond you are of Bob, and I know you don't like me to weaken his opinions. I'll grant you he smells well. So what? He's flighty, cocker-brained, and brash. To use an expression, that was common when I was a boy, Bob is a twerp."

Mrs. Danvers pulled the lattice planter so far over to her own side of the table that Bjornsson couldn't get another cookie from it without getting up and stretching out along the table cloth. "I don't agree with you," she said charitably. "Robert is a splendid fellow, so thoughtful and considerate. He takes a real interest in my soap

carvings, and how many young men with an important position like his, third man on a space freighter with a regularly scheduled run, would remember to send back plants from every port of call to an aunt on earth? I shouldn't be surprised if I won a blue ribbon at the flower show again, this year, my Golden Rain plant is about to bloom. Robert tells me it's a lovely thing."

The captain cast a watchful look at the cookie plate. "Well, don't say I didn't warn you," he replied. "What's Bob due in port?"

Mrs. Danvers's face relaxed. "Around the twenty-fifth," she said. "He sent me a 'gram. Here, have another cookie. I must think up some little thing to cook for him as a surprise."

The captain snatched a handful of cookies from the plate and stood up to go. "Your ordinary cooking's good enough for me," he declared, "but, if you mean something like those little strange fried or butter you had the last time he was here, go ahead. And watch for that plant." He stalked off across the lawn.

He's getting old, thought Amy Danvers, watching the gruff old codger limp around a flower bed (Bjornsson had had prostate surgery after he lost his leg and, though it had been successful, grafts were never as flexible as natural members), positively old. He ought to see a geriatrician right away. She'd tell him so the next time he came to see her. Talking about Robert that way!

She sat the dad on the robot pedestal on the front lawn to "Weeding: discontinue" and started along the path that led to the little bathroom where most of the plants Robert had sent her were growing, even as the deep tropics Terra was, with few exceptions, too mild and dry for them. The Martian subjects on the other hand, were in a psychotropic haze-on, with hypnoscopes

and a battery of infra-red lamps to keep the temperature up during the day.

The heavy moist air of the hothouse made Amy Dunscombe point a little at the ground it—just how uncomfortable it was! Even the leaves of her Venusian plants were fascinating, thick and lustrous, then and dry and hard like parchment, hanging in heavy serpentine coils or bending pointed and sharp as so many spears. And their coloring ranged from cream through a silky tawny and ash-rose to a sooty bright metallic blue. As for these flowers—oh, my. Amy Dunscombe had never seen anything like them. All you could do was stare in front of them with your mouth open and stare. When the wasn't looking at her Martian succulents, they were her favorites of anything she grew.

She talked in front of the plant Robert had seen her lose. Yes, Hylmar Hjornsson was getting definitely weird. How could anybody think that this poor little dead-up thing could be harmful? It was a mere bundle of desiccated stems, with only a tiny new leaf or two to indicate that it was alive. It looked a little better than it had yesterday, though, the colorless solution must have been good for it. Amy brushed a few dead flies from the ledge behind it onto her hand and threw them into the compost. She liked to have things still.

Now, what should she cook as a surprise for Robert? He was fond of sweet things of course, but it always seemed to her that he passed her more dishes and sweets most. He liked her cooking so much because her sweet nibbys and pulled meats had a crust on them; electronically cooked food was quick to prepare and it might be as good for you as they said it was, but the outside looked like the inside, and it also tasted flavorless and grey. What was the use of saving time in cooking if you ended up with food that wasn't any fun to eat?

"YOU aren't looking well, Amy," Captain Hjornsson said three or four weeks later. He looked at her with the casual attention of an old friend. "You've got on a lot of cream-lac, but you still looked peaked. What's the matter, worried about Bob? Ships don't go hurt as much anymore any more." He looked down at his grained feet unconcernedly. "Was like it was when I was a third mate."

Amy Dunscombe shook her head. She picked up one of the brightly-colored hemipods—they had been playing a desultory game of *Mareola* in the very coolness of the side room—and fiddled with it.

"I haven't been sleeping well," she confessed at last. "I've had such unpleasant dreams. Harried things."

"What about?" Hjornsson asked. "That blasted plant? Honestly, Amy, it looks like some kind of spider to me."

"No! I don't know why you can't leave my

Venusian Rambler alone! Robert told me it was a very valuable plant, rare even in its own habitat. It's doing so nicely, too. A spider? I wish you'd stop trying to spoil it for me."

"I'm sorry," Hjornsson apologized. "Forget it. Go on, tell me about your dreams."

"Well, on Tuesday—or was it Wednesday?—yes, it must have been Tuesday because that was the day after I flew over to Harried—I was down by the hothouse and I found the most unpleasant thing beside the path." She shuddered. "I've been dreaming about it ever since."

"What was it?" Hjornsson asked.

"Oh, no—I guess it must have been a spider once. One of the wild ones. Only it was nothing except some fur and some bones. Not decayed, Hylmar, you understand, just gone. I can't imagine what had happened to it."

"Better see a mental hygienist," the Captain advised after a pause. "Hjornsson can be very serious."

"I suppose so. I really dread going to sleep."

THE next morning, very early, Amy turned on the floor with uncertain fingers. What a horrid dream it had been! She could hardly believe that it hadn't been real and that she was safe and sound in her own bedroom after all.

Outside, the noise that had awakened her—the ripped, unearthly intermingling of a couple of tomatoes plummeting in the moonlight—came again. Ordinarily it was a noise Amy disliked very much—the other things always sounded as if they were in deadly agony—but now she was glad to hear it. Hylmar, if it hadn't been for those cars crying and waking her up, she might still be asleep and dreaming. Dreaming about—about—blood.

She turned the ceiling selector to "sunrise sky," lay back on her pillow, and tried to relax. It was her favorite of all the settings her bedroom had, so lovely and calm and blue, and right now she needed something lovely and calm. One thing was sure, she wasn't going to mind the much longer. She didn't believe in punishing herself, but if she had that dream once more she was going to take Hjornsson's advice and see a mental hygienist.

She'd think about something pleasant. Amy tried to fix her mind on her gardening, on how well her plants were doing, but it wasn't a success. When she tried to keep her thoughts on her Venusian Rambler (why did they call it a Rambler?)—a woody turning-out-a large, stocky, compact bush more like an ornamental Camellia than anything else Amy Dunscombe could think of), they kept vanishing back to her dream, and all that—all that—

Well, then she'd think about Robert. She was a lucky woman to have a nephew like him. She'd worked out several times, all the things he liked best, but she worked she could think of something a little different. There were so few kinds of meat, when everything was said and

came to her while she was making a stonnetic or plaque out of soap.

The mood concluded, she put out her set of modeling knives and a couple of cubes of soap. Soap was rather hard to get, since most people used synthetic detergents nowadays, but she knew a little store on Perth Amboy that carried it. This hot bench had a lovely texture.

Andy noticed the living-room on its own and the light was exactly right, and then sat down in front of her canvas, dark. What should she make? A stonnetic? A plaque? A plaque in low relief, a glimpse of a flower. Somehow, she didn't want to think about stonnetic right now.

She had slouched in the conventionalized Hermodorikon and was beginning to pick it out carefully from the background when it occurred to her that she hadn't been down to the bathroom this morning to see her plants.

Why, that would never do, she mustn't neglect them, it was terribly important. Important. After that hair, how dirty the hair! She'd better go at once, she'd better . . . go . . . Cube of soap in one hand, knife in the other, pinning a little, Andy sat out toward her plants in a stonnetic sun.

She was half-way to the bathroom before it occurred to her to question the regular which had taken her momentarily from her carving and set her at Wild Motion toward the bathroom, and by then it was too late. She was no longer a free agent in any sense of the term. The great big which had taken the rabbit and the cat to their death had appeared on her doorstep. Rescue from her body, in a glossy paralysis of fear and impotence, Andy watched her feet moving bravely down the path.

Oh, if she could only cry out, *ask Hylmar!* She felt the muscles of her throat straining, but no sound came. And now she was standing before the bathroom, and her hand had opened the door.

The Rambler was waiting for her. Very slowly, like a man flexing his arm, it reached out one of the sticky branches toward her. Andy saw that at the end of the branch, well hidden under the dark green glossy leaves, was a slender, translucent, hollow thorn. It was about the size of the hypodermic needle the doctor had used when, in her last year's physical examination, he'd taken a sample of blood.

Andy knew exactly what was going to happen. First the hollow thorn, next her veins were dry, and then the slowly opening pores, gaping above the big, swollen, center-vein base the thick leaves of the Rambler had served to conceal. It would take a long time, but Hylmar would never miss her before it was too late.

The Rambler's branch moved delicately over the surface of Andy's right wrist, the one with the modeling knife. The other branches were swooping largely away from the purple-pink of its swollen base, waving, while it buried the outer spot. It hesitated for an instant and then—

Andy's mouth drew into a soundless Oh of pain—stuck home.

A dark fluid began to seep the hollow thorn. For just a fraction of a second the Rambler's nasal grip on Andy Dimmore relaxed, she could feel its blind concentration on its own black enjoyment. And in that fraction of a second Andy drew the cube of soap in her left hand straight into the Rambler's sticky mass.

The Rambler gapped at her mind again, but it was a threatened and feeble gap. Its branches began to mass around the sticky hole they had shielded, slowly, and then in a furious heaving. The thorn which had entered her wrist was jaggedly withdrawn. Andy, her wrist streaming blood, stared at the Rambler for a moment and then lunged at it with the modeling knife.

SITTING outside on the ground beside the bathroom afterwards, her forehead on her hands, feeling sick and alone, Andy had an idea. At first she pushed it from her; it was too-fetched, silly, even a little repulsive.

But was it so silly after all? And as to being unpleasant, well, bolts must command tremendous power in the matter and, from everything she'd ever heard, the bolts was the very reverse of a handsome leader. Even pigs certainly weren't dirty in their eating habits. If she garboked it in several years and then bit it slowly, with a hint of ginger in the snout . . . Well, after all, why not?

Andy, the modeling knife in her hand, went into the bathroom again . . .

" . . . Gee, Aunt Amy, that must be good," Robert said. He was talking with his mouth full. "I've never indigenous chow on three planets—four, if you call the stuff they serve you on Uranus food—and it's my opinion that there isn't a better cook anywhere in the system than you, Pa. How do you do it, anyhow?"

Andy Dimmore lowered her eyes. She could feel herself blushing through her opacities. "Oh . . . thank you, Robert."

"She sure is, Bob," Hylmar Bjornson said expansively. "That gory! She's the best cook on Terra all the time, but when you're in port she gets out of inspired."

"What kind of meat is this, though, Amy? And could I have some more?"

"Of course," Amy said. She stifled Hylmar's plea. "It's something new I found in the hot sun-market in the city," she said vaguely.

"By the way, Aunt Amy," Bob said, lying down his fork, "after I eat you this place I heard it was supposed to be carnivorous. I forgot to mention it in my last 'gram. You didn't get into any trouble with it, did you?"

"No, a shed," Amy said unsmiling. "I had to throw it out. Too hot." She brightened. "You're plate, Robert dear," she said.

THE END

DEATH-BY-RAIN

★

By **RAY BRADBURY**

★

Four men, crash-landed on Venus, world of eternal rain. Three men, staggering through drenching gloom. Two men, staggering senselessly on. One man, battling at the endless curtains of rain, RAIN, RAIN!

THE rain continued. It was a hard rain, a perpetual rain, a sweating and steaming rain; it was minute, a downpour, a fountain, a whirling at the open, an underflow at the ceiling; it was a rain to drown all rain and the memory of rain. It came by the pound and the ton, it lashed at the jungle and cut the trees like scissors and shaved the grass and mangled the soil and smacked the bushes. It struck man's head into the hands of wounded men; it entered a soul plucky rain and it never stopped.

"How much further, gentlemen?"

"I don't know. A mile, ten miles, a thousand."

"Haven't you seen?"

"How can I be sure?"

"I don't like this rain. If we only knew how far it is to the San Dams, I'd feel better."

"Another hour or two from here."

"You really think so, gentlemen?"

"Oh course."

"Or are you lying to keep us happy?"

"I'm lying to keep you happy. Shut up!"

"It'll clear up."

The two men sat together in the rain. Behind them sat two other men, who were wet and tired and shivered like dry that was raining.

The lieutenant looked up. He had a face that once had been brown and now the rain had washed it pale, and the rain had washed the colour from his eyes and they were white, as were his teeth, and as was his hair. He was all white. Even his uniform was beginning to turn white, and perhaps a little green with fungus.

The lieutenant felt the rain on his cheeks. "How many million years since the rain stopped pouring here on Venus?"

"Don't be crazy," said one of the two other men. "It never stops raining on Venus. It just goes on and on. I've lived here for ten years and I never saw a minute, or even a second, when it wasn't pouring."

"It's like living under water," said the lieutenant, and came up, shivering his teeth into place. "Well, we'd better get going. We'll find that San Dams yet."

"Or we won't find it," said the squad.

"It's an hour or so."

"Now you're lying to me, lieutenant."

"No, now I'm lying to myself. This is one of those times when you've got to lie. I can't take much more of this."

They walked down the jungle trail, now and then looking at their companions. There was no distress anywhere, only what the company and. There was a gray sky and rain falling and jungle and a path, and, far back behind them, somewhere, a rocket in which they had ridden and fallen. A rocket in which by two of their friends, dead and dripping rain.

They walked in single file, not speaking. They came to a river which lay wide and flat and brown, flowing down to the great Single Sea. The surface of it was stopped in a billion places by the rain.

"All right, Simmons."

THE lieutenant pulled and Simmons took a small packet from his back which, with a pressure of hidden chemical, inflated into a large boat. The lieutenant directed the casting of wood and the quick unshing of pebbles and they set out into the river, peddling steadily across the smooth surface in the rain.

The lieutenant felt the cold rain on his cheeks and on his neck and on his moving arms. The cold was beginning to seep into his lungs. He felt the rain on his ears, on his eyes, on his legs.

"I didn't sleep last night," he said.

"Who could? Who had? When? How many nights have we slept? Thirty nights, thirty days? Who can sleep with rain clattering their head, banging every . . . I'd give anything for a hat. Anything at all, just so it wouldn't hit my head any more. I get headaches, my head is sore, it hurts all the time."

"I'm sorry I came to China," said one of the others.

"First time I ever heard Venus called China."

"Sure, China. Chinese Water Cure. Remember the old cartoon? Rape you against a wall. Drop one drop of water on your head every half-hour. You go crazy waiting for the next one. Well, that's Venus, but on a big scale. We're not made for water. You can't sleep, you can't breathe right, and you're crazy from just being soggy. If we'd been ready for a crash, we'd have brought waterproof uniforms and hats. It's this beating rain on your head gets you, most of all. It's so heavy. It's like BB shot. I don't know how long I can take it."

"Boy, not for the San Dome. The rain who thought them up, thought of something."

They crossed the river and in crossing they thought of the San Dome, somewhere ahead of them, shining in the jungle rain. A yellow house, round and bright as the sun. A house fifteen feet high by one hundred feet in diameter, in which was warmth and quiet and hot food and freedom from rain. And in the center of the San Dome, of course, was a sun. A small glowing, fire globe of yellow fire, drifting in a space at the top of the building where you could look at it from where you sat, smoking or reading a book or drinking your hot chocolate crowned with mandarinella dollops. There it would be, the yellow sun, just the size of the Earth sun, and it was warm and continuous and the rain world of Venus would be forgotten as long as they stayed in that house and filled their time.

The lieutenant turned and looked back at the three men using their ears and proving their path. They were as white as mandarinella, as white as he was. Venus bleached everything away in a few minutes. Even the jungle was an immense cartoon nightmare, for how could the jungle be green with no sun, with always rain falling and always dark? The white white jungle with the pale chrome-colored leaves, and the earth carved of wet Carabene, and the tree-holes like immense neckholes, everything black and white.

And how often could you see the soil itself? Wasn't it mostly a creek, a stream, a puddle, a pool, a lake, a river, and then, at last the sea? "Here we are!"

They leaped out on the farthest shore, splashing and standing up shivering. The boat was deflated and mired in a capricious pocket. Then, standing on the mossy shore, they tried to light up a few smokes for themselves, and it was two minutes or so before, shuddering, they worked the inverted lighter and, cupping their hands, managed a few drags upon cigarettes that, all too quickly, were long and bare away from their lips by a sudden slap of rain.

They walked on.

"Wait just a moment," said the lieutenant. "I thought I saw something ahead."

"The San Dome?"

"It's not sure. The rain closed in again."

Simmons began to run. "The San Dome!"

"Come back, Simmons!"

"The San Dome!"

Simmons vanished in the rain. The others ran after him.

They found him in a little clearing and they stopped and looked at him and what he had discovered.

The rocket ship.

It was lying where they had left it. Somehow they had circled back and were where they had started. In the rain of the ship, green flames were pouring up out of the open mouth of the two dead men. As they watched, the flames took flower, the petals broke away in the rain, and the flames died.

"How did we do it?"

"An electrical storm must be nearby. Throw our components off. That explains it."

"You're right."

"What'll we do now?"

"Start out again."

"Good Lord, we're not any closer to anywhere!"

"Let's try to keep calm about it, Simmons."

"Calm, calm! This rain's driving me wild!"

"We've enough food for another two days if we're careful."

The rain danced on their skin, on their wet uniforms; the rain streamed from their noses and ears, from their fingers and knees. They looked like stone fountain flowers in the jungle, sending forth waters from every pore.

And, as they stood, from a distance they heard a roar.

And the monster came out of the rain.

The monster was supported upon a thousand electric blue legs. It walked steadily and terribly. It cracked down a leg with a driving blow. Everywhere a leg struck a tree fell and burned. Great whiffs of smoke filled the rainy air, and smoke blew away and was broken by the rain. The monster was a half-mile wide and a mile high, and it felt of the ground like a goose blind thing.

Sometimes, for a moment, it had no legs at all. And then, in an instant, a drenched whale would fall out of its belly, where-blue whips, no using the trunk.

"There's the described storm," said one of the men. "There's the thing that ruined our companions. And it's coming this way."

"Lie down, everyone," said the lieutenant.

"Run!" cried Sammons.

"Don't be a fool, Lie down. It has the highest poles. We may get through unharmed. Lie down about fifty feet from the rocket. It may very well spend its force there and leave us be. Get down!"

The men dropped.

"Is it coming?" they asked each other, after a moment.

"Coming."

"Is it near?"

"Two hundred yards off."

"Never!"

"Then the hell!"

The monster came and stood over them. It dropped down ten blue bolts of lightning which struck the rocket. The rocket flared like a beacon going and gave off a rapid racing. The monster lay down fifteen more bolts which danced about in a ridiculous posturing, before of the jungle and the watery soil.

"No, no!" One of the men jumped up.

"Get down, you fool!" said the lieutenant.

"No!"

The lightning struck the rocket another dozen times. The lieutenant raised his head on his own and saw the blue blazing flashes. He saw men up and scramble and run. He saw the monstrous dark cloud run like a black dog overhead and hurt down a hundred other bolts of electricity.

The man who had leaped up was now running, like someone in a great hall of pillars. He ran and dodged between the pillars and then at last a dozen of the pillars shrank down and there was the sound of fly makes when landing upon the grill wires of an automobile. The lieutenant remembered that from his childhood on a farm, and there was a smell of a man burned to a cinder.

The lieutenant lowered his head. "Don't look up," he told the others. He was afraid that he might run, himself, at any moment.

The storm above them faded down another series of bolts and then moved on away. Once again there was only the sea, which rapidly changed the air of the charged smell, and in a moment the three remaining men were sitting up and waiting for the beat of their hearts to subside into quiet once more.

They walked over to the body, thinking that perhaps they could still save the man's life. They couldn't believe that there wasn't some way to help the man. It was the natural set of men who have not accepted death until they have touched it and turned it over and made plans to

bury it or leave it there for the people to bury in an hour of quick growth.

The body was coated steel, wrapped in burnt leather. It looked like a wax dummy that had been thrown into an incinerator and pulled out after the wax had sunk to the charcoal skeleton. Only the teeth were white, and those like a strange white branch dropped half through a cleaved black bar.

"He shouldn't have jumped up," Tilly said in disgust at the same time.

Even as they stood over the body, it began to vanish, for the vegetation was edging in upon it, little vines and ivy and creepers and even flowers for the dead.

At a distance, the storm walked off on blue bolts of lightning and was gone.

THEY crossed a clear and a creek and a stream and a dozen other rivers and creeks and streams. Before their eyes, even appeared, rushing, new rivers, while old rivers changed their courses, rivers the colour of mercury, rivers the colour of silver and milk.

They came to the sea.

The Single Sea. There was only one continent on Venus. This land was three thousand miles long by a thousand miles wide, and about this island was the Single Sea, which covered the entire running planet. The Single Sea which lay upon the polished shore with little waves.

"This way?" The lieutenant nodded south. "I'm sure there are two Sea Deans down that way."

"While they were at it, why didn't they build a hundred more?"

"There're a hundred and twenty of them now, aren't there?"

"One hundred and twenty-six, as of last month. They tried to push a bolt through Congress back on Earth a year ago to provide for a couple dozen more, but oh, no, you know how that is. They'd rather a few men went crazy with the run."

They started south.

The lieutenant and Sammons and the third man, Pellard, walked on the run, in the run that fell heavily and light, heavily and light, in the run that poured and hammered and did not stop falling upon the head and sea and the walking people.

Sammons saw a first. "There's a!"

"There's what?"

"The Sea Deans!"

The lieutenant blinked the water from his eyes and moved his head to ward off the stinging blows of the rain.

At a distance, there was a yellow glow on the edge of the jungle, by the sea. It was, indeed, the Sea Deans.

The men looked at each other.

"Look! like you were right, lieutenant."

"Look."

"Heater, that poor wretch is not, just seeing

it. Come and see one there's a sea-of-sun-cock!" Samson began to trot. The others automatically fell in with this, prancing, trot, but keeping pace.

"A big pot of coffee for me," panted Samson, catching. "And a pot of chicken soup, by Jove! And just be there and let our old man let you. The way that invented the San Dome, he should have got a medal!"

They ran faster. The yellow glow grew brighter.

"Guess a lot of rain went crazy before they figured out the cure. Think it'd be dangerous. Right off." Samson treated the words as evidence as he running. "Rain, usual. Years ago. Found a island. Of mine. Out in the jungle. Wandering around. In the rain. Saying over and over, 'Don't know enough, to come on, with the rain. Don't know enough—' On and on. Like that. Poor crazy fool."

"Save your breath!"

They ran.

They all laughed. They reached the door of the San Dome, laughing.

Samson yanked the door wide. "Hey!" he yelled. "Bring on the coffee and lunch!"

There was no reply.

They stopped through the door.

THE San Dome was empty and dark. There was no spontaneous yellow sun floating in a high gaseous whisper at the center of the blue ceiling. There was no food waiting. It was cold as a walk. And through a thousand holes which had been newly punctured in the ceiling, water streamed, the rain fell down, soaking into the thick rugs and the heavy modern furniture and splashing on the glass tables. The jungle was growing up like a mass in the rooms, on top of the bookcases and the doors. The rain slashed through the holes and fell upon the three men's faces.

Pickard began to laugh quietly.

"Shut up, Pickard!"

"To heck, look what's here for us—no food, no sun, nothing. The Venusians—they did it! Of course!"

Samson nodded, with the rain splashing down on his face. The water ran in his silvered hair and on his white eyebrows. "Every once in awhile, the Venusians come up out of the sea and attack a San Dome. They know if they can run the San Domes they can run us."

"But aren't the San Domes protected with guns?"

"Sure." Samson stopped aside to a place that was relatively dry. "But it's been five years since the Venusians tried anything. Defense useless. They can't run the Dome anymore."

"Where are the bodies?"

"The Venusians took them all down into the sea. I hear they have a delightful way of drowning you. It takes about eight hours to drown the way they work it. Really delightful."

"I bet there isn't any food here at all," laughed Pickard.

The lieutenant frowned at him, pointed at him as Samson could see. Samson shook his head and went back to a room at one side of the oval chamber. The kitchen was strewn with soggy leaves of bread, and meat that had grown a brown green. But Samson came through a hundred holes in the kitchen roof.

"Brilliant!" The lieutenant glanced up at the holes. "I don't suppose we can plug up all those holes and get any heat."

"Without food, sir?" Samson scoffed. "I notice the sea machine's turn apart. Our best bet is to make our way to the next San Dome. How far is that from here?"

"Not far. As I recall, they took two rather close together here. Perhaps if we waited here, a rescue mission from the other might—"

"It's probably been here and gone already, some days ago. They'll send a crew to repair this place in about six months, when they get the money from Congress. I don't think we'd better wait."

"All right, then, we'll see what's left of our mission, and get on the next Dome."

Pickard said, "If only the sea wouldn't hit my head, that for a few minutes. If I could only remember what it's like not to be hatched." He put his hands on his skull and held it tight. "I remember when I was in school, a bully used to go in on back of me and punch me and pinch me and pinch me every five minutes, all day long. He did that for weeks and months. My arms were sore and black and blue all the time. And I thought I'd go crazy from being pinched. One day I mean have gone a little mad from being hurt and hurt, and I turned around and took a metal tin-appeal. I used an mechanical drawing and I almost killed the sucker. I almost cut his hairy head off, I almost took his eye out before they dragged me out of the room, and I kept yelling, why don't he leave me alone, why don't he leave me alone. Brother!" His hands clenched the bone of his head, shaking, tightening, his eyes shut. "But what do I do now? What do I do, who do I tell to lay off, stop bothering me, that damn rain, like the pinching, always on you, that's all you hear, that's all you feel!"

"We'll be at the other San Dome by four this afternoon."

"San Dome? Look at this one! What if all the San Domes on Venus are gone—what then? What if there are holes in all the ceilings, and the rain is coming in?"

"We'll have to chance it."

"I'm tired of chance it. All I want is a roof and some quiet, I want to be let alone."

"That's only eight hours off, if you hold on."

"Don't worry, I'll hold on all right." And Pickard laughed, not looking at them.

"Let's go," said Samson, watching him.

THEY set off down the coast, northward again.

After four hours they had to cut inland to go around a river that was a mile wide and so swift it was not navigable by boat. They had to walk inland six miles to a place where the river boiled out of the earth, suddenly, like a mortal wound. In the sun, they walked on solid ground and returned to the sea.

"I've got to sleep," said Pickard, at last. He slumped. "Haven't slept in four weeks. Tired, but couldn't. Sleep here."

The sky was getting darker. The night of Venus was closing in and it was so completely black that it was dangerous to move. Simmons and the lieutenant fell to their knees also, and the lieutenant said, "All right, we'll see what we can do. We've tried it before, but I don't know. Sleep doesn't seem one of the things you can get in this weather."

They lay out full, propping their heads up so the water wouldn't come to their mouths, and they closed their eyes.

The lieutenant reached.

He did not sleep.

There were things that crawled on his skin. Things grew upon him in layers. Drops fell and touched either drops and they became streams that trickled over his body, and while these moved down his back, the small growths of the forest took root in his clothing. He felt the dry clasp and make a second garment over him; he felt the small flowers bud and open and petal away, and still the rain pattered on his body and on his head. In the lieutenant's night, for the vegetation glowed in the darkness, he could see the other two men outlined, like logs that had fallen and taken upon themselves velvet coverings of green and flower. The rain hit his face. He covered his face with his hands. The rain hit his hands. He raised his head. The rain hit his neck. He turned over on his stomach in the mud, on the rocky plains, and the rain hit his back and hit his legs.

Sudden he leaped up and began to brush the water from himself. A thousand hands were reaching him and he no longer wanted to be touched. He no longer could stand being touched. He floundered and struck something else and knew that it was Simmons, standing himself up in the rain, sweating moisture, coughing and choking. And then Pickard was up, shaking, running about.

"Wait a minute, Pickard!"

"Stop it, stop it!" screamed Pickard. He fired off his gun six times at the night sky. In the flashes of powdery illumination they could see swarms of mandrills, suspended as in a vast molasses amber, for an instant, huddled as if shocked by the explosion, fifteen billion droplets, fifteen billion tears, fifteen billion agonies, joints striding out against a white velvet glowing band. And then, with the light gone, the drops which had waited so long for their precious rain, which had suspended their downward rush, fell

upon them, stinging, in an instant cloud of coldness and pain.

"Stop it, stop it!"

"Pickard!"

But Pickard was only standing now, alone. When the lieutenant reached on a small hand-lamp and played it over Pickard's wet face, the eyes of the man were closed, and his mouth was open, his face turned up, so the water hit and splashed on his tongue, and his and droved the wide eyes, and bubbled in a whispering rush on the nostrils.

"Pickard!"

The man would not reply. He simply stood there for a long while with the bubbles of rain breaking out in his whitened hair and masses of rain jewels dripping from his veins and his neck.

"Pickard! We're leaving. We're going on. Follow us."

The rain dropped from Pickard's ears.

"Do you hear me, Pickard?"

It was like shouting down a well.

"Pickard!"

"Leave him alone," said Simmons.

"We can't go on without him."

"What'll we do, carry him?" Simmons spat.

"He's no good to us as himself. You know what he'll do? He'll just stand here and drown."

"What?"

"You ought to know that by now. Don't you know the story? He'll just stand here with his head up and let the rain come in his nostrils and his mouth. He'll breathe the water."

"No."

"That's how they found General Muck that time. Sitting on a rock with his head back, breathing the rain. His lungs were full of water."

The lieutenant turned the light back to the unblinking face. Pickard's nostrils gave off a tiny whispering wet sound.

"Pickard!" The lieutenant stopped the face.

"He can't even feel you," said Simmons. "A few days in this rain and you don't have any face or any legs or hands."

The lieutenant looked at his own hand in horror. He could no longer feel it.

"Rag we can't leave Pickard here."

"I'll show you what we do," Simmons fired his gun.

Pickard fell into the raining earth.

SIMMONS said, "Don't move, lieutenant. I've got my gun ready for you too. Think it over, he would only have moved or sat there and drowned. It's quicker this way."

The lieutenant blinked at the body. "But you killed him."

"Yes, because he'd have killed us by being a burden. You saw his face. Inane."

After a moment, the lieutenant nodded. "All right."

They walked off into the rain.

It was dark and their hand lamps threw a beam that pierced the rain for only a few feet. After a half-hour, they had to stop and sit through the rest of the night, shivering with hunger, for the down to come, and when it did come it was gray and continuously raining as before, and they began to walk again.

"We've miscalculated," said Sammons.

"No. Another house."

"Speak louder. I can't hear you." Sammons stopped and smiled. "By Joe," he said, and shouted his own. "My own. They've come out on me. All the rain pouring, finally grabbed me right down to the bone."

"Can't you hear anything?" said the lieutenant.

"What? Sammons' eyes were pained.

"Nothing. Come on."

"I think I'll wait here. You go on ahead."

"You can't do that."

"I can't hear you. You go on. I've tried. I don't think the San Diego is down this way. And, if it is, no probably got holes in the roof, like the last one. I think I'll just sit here."

"Go. up from there!"

"Be loud, lieutenant!"

"You can't give up now."

I've got a gun here that says I'm staying. I just don't give a damn my nose. I'm not easy yes, but I'm the same thing to it. I don't want to go out that way. As soon as you get out of sight I'm going to use this gun on myself."

"Sammons!"

"You read my mind. I can read that much of your lip."

"Sammons."

"Look, it's a matter of time. Either I die now or in a few hours. What'll you get to that next house, if you ever get there, and find rain coming in through the roof. Won't that be nice?"

The lieutenant waited and then splashed off in the rain. He turned and called back once, but Sammons was only waving frantically with the gun in his hands, waiting for him to get out of sight. He shook his head and waved the lieutenant on.

The lieutenant didn't even hear the sound of the gun.

HE began to cut the flowers as he walked. They stayed down for a time, and weren't poisonous, neither were they particularly refreshing, and he wanted them up, early, a minute or so later.

Once he took some leaves and tried to make himself a hat, but he had tried that before, the rain melted the leaves from his head. Once picked, the vegetation wilted quickly and fell into gray masses in your fingers.

"Another five minutes," he told himself. "Another five minutes and then I'll walk into the rain and keep walking. We wasn't made for this, no Sammons was or ever will be able to make it. Your nerves, your nerves."

He abandoned his way through a sea of dark and foliage and came to a small hill.

At a distance, there was a faint yellow smudge in the cold web of water.

The next San Diego.

Through the trees, a long yellow building, far away. For a moment he only stood, staring, looking at it.

He began to run, and then he slowed down, for he was afraid. He didn't call out. What if it's the same man, what if it's the dead San Diego, with no man in it, he thought.

He stopped and fell. Lie here, he thought. It's the wrong one. Lie here, it's no use. Drink all you want.

But he managed to climb to his feet again, and crossed several creeks, and the yellow light grew very bright, and he began to run again, his feet crashing over stones and glass, his ears finding a chorus of still previous voices.

He stood before the yellow door. The painted letters over it said *San Diego*. He put his numb hand up to feel it. Then he opened the door and stumbled in.

He stood for a moment looking about. Behind him, the rain whirled at the door. Ahead of him, upon a low table, stood a silver pot of hot chocolate, unopened, and a cup, full, with a marshmallow in it. And beside that, on another tray, stood three sandwiches of such chicken, meat and fresh cut tomatoes and green onions. And on a rod just below his eyes was a great thick green Turkish towel, and a hat in which to throw wet clothes, and to his right, a small alcove in which hot rays might dry you instantly. And upon a chair, a fresh change of clothes, waiting for anyone, himself, or any lost one, to make use of it. And further over, coffee in sparkling copper urns, and a phonograph from which music was playing quietly, and books bound in red and hatched leather. And near the books a cot, a soft deep cot upon which one might lie, exposed and bare to drink in the rays of the one great bright thing which dominated the long room.

He put his hands to his eyes. He saw other men moving toward him, but said nothing to them. He waited, and opened his eyes, and looked. The water pooled at his feet from his uniform, and he felt it drying from his hair and his face and his chest and his arms and his legs.

He was looking at the Sun.

It hung in the center of the room, large and yellow and warm. It made not a sound, and there was no sound in the room. The door was shut and the rain only a memory to his tingling body. The sun hung high in the blue sky of the room, warm, hot, yellow, and very fine.

He walked forward, tearing off his clothes as he went.

COLLISION ORBIT



*The tiny asteroid with the frightened girl and
the wrecked spacer with the grim young man
slowly spun closer and closer . . . but the real
danger came after the crash!*



By **CLYDE BECK**

THERE'S one good thing about a blowout. You don't need a mechanic to tell you what the trouble is when it happens. This was the first blowout I ever had, but as soon as I heard that explosive gurgling whistle and felt the floppy jolting and the terrifying sensation of a vehicle out of control, I knew what was wrong. I reached forward and cut the power.

When I leaned back in my seat I was sweating and my stomach was pushing my contents around, and not only on account of the sudden wrench from one and a half G's to free fall. I was in a jam, and didn't need a mechanic to tell me that, either. Spacehips don't carry spare drive tubes.

Not little weapons like the *Asperis*, anyway. If you could get a spare inside the hull you would have to leave out the jet plant or the processor, or else stay home yourself, and even then there would be no room for the tools to make the change. Rebuilding is a dock job, and the nearest docks were a million miles away on *Posidon* and getting farther fast.

And besides, you never need a spare. Tubes don't blow in space. Diamondized graphite is tough—you collapse the throat every time you dock, and after a few thousand G-hours you find enough erosion to cut down efficiency to the point where it's a good idea to put in a new liner.

I knew all that, but at the same time I knew the main tube had blown. What I didn't know was what I was going to do about it. I lit a cigarette and took a deep drag, just in case the smoldering effect of the quibba smoke would give me an inspiration.

It made me sneeze.

I threw the heat on the deck and reached it with my head before it could bounce off and go adrift in the cabin. I never had liked the taste of the woody stuff any way. Smoking quibba is the prime symptom of a spaceman—it has the reputation of being a specific against spacemeness, keeping the cerebral meninges against high acceleration, cutting down reaction time when you have to act fast in a matter field. Maybe it's all true. One thing it really does is make your clothes smell like a vacant lot on fire so people can say, "Ah, he's a spaceman," without having to sit.

No inspiration. Okay, Denby, think it out with your own brain. You've got a brain, haven't you?

Not being very eager to do any thinking about the situation I was in, I dropped the bulgur out from under the seat and crawled into it. I had a vague idea that I might take up some sort of push bar for the tube and maybe leap back to *Mim*. I wasn't proud of it, but it was the best I had at the moment. I checked to make sure there was nothing on the screens, and then pulled myself over to the air lock, sealed the inner door, and started the pump.

While the chamber was exhausting, I tested the ladder bar and snapped the end of it to a ring on the inner rim of the hull. When the lock clicked I pulled the hatch open and hooked it back. Then I took a short hold on the ladder bar and stepped out into space.

For a minute I worked I had finished the quibba. This was not the first time I had been in open space, but the circumstances had not been so impressive before. Free fall had never

bothered me particularly, but it bothered me now, with millions of miles of empty space under me in all directions and nothing in the sky but the tiny bright stars looking very far away. And the realization that I was alone, with a crippled ship, and a very good chance that the mission would be permanent, made me feel that an accident against space sickness would be a handy thing to have.

After a while the muscles of my forearm began to ache from gripping the bottom line so hard. I let go of it and took hold of a hand rail and grunted back to the stern.

It was a blowout, all right. The knee was completely gone and the jacket was a fused lump of slag. All I would need to patch it up was a week in the shops and a three-man crew. I crawled back along the hull and went through the hatch like a rabbit going down its hole.

I stowed away the suit and tucked myself in the seat. So I would have to think anyway. I got out a pencil and ruled the tape out of the accelerometer and began figuring.

It took me an hour, which was not very good. Neither was the answer. I gashed the paper away and started all over again. The answer was still the same. The Aspera would miss the orbit of Jupiter by more than fifty million miles, and my nearest approach would occur about three and a half years after Jupiter had passed my intended point of departure.

Of course those figures were only rough, and would be revised one way or the other after I had time to make a few triangulation shots. But I couldn't hope for much encouragement from any such reckoning. The Aspera, the ship my father had used to make the first landing on an uncharted icey planet, was going to end up as an asteroid herself, and I would have the honor of being sole inhabitant—as long as I lived!

I grabbed a sheet of paper and began figuring again. It took me only a minute or two this time. The period of the Aspera's orbit was seven and a half years, and seven and a half years Earth time make four Mars years within a few days. That was how much hope I had—in seven and a half years I would be back in the heartless vicinity of Mars, and I might have enough power in the morning jets to claw my way in to one of the moons. If I didn't bump into an asteroid. If Jupiter didn't pull me too far off course. If I didn't go star-happy as the moon-while, or starve. Before seven and a half years were up I'd be eating the air plant.

I threw down the pencil, caught it on the first wild bounce, and moved it away in my pocket. I felt like a fool.

With reason. It takes a very fancy kind of fuel to run four years in the Galactic averages on Venus, getting drunk only every second month

so he can live up enough of his pay to put himself through Space Tech, and then, when he graduated second in his class, to throw away a plenty job with Transducer and go hanging off into space in an ancient can and get himself wrecked just because he has a girl told him once making a magnificent future.

That's what I told myself. It didn't help any, but I had it coming. I was a worse fool than that, even Betty Dey hadn't picked me into this. I had thought the whole thing up with my own little brain. The point of the idea was here, though, or rather the inspiration for it.

II

FOR that matter, Betty Dey inspired a lot of my ideas, ever since my first opening day at Space Tech. The first task they put us to on the opening day was to sit through a welcoming address from the President of the Institute. Maybe it was a good speech if you happened to be a kid fresh out of school, like most of the class, with your head full of the ideas of romance and glory that the broken space opera pump into the cash customers, but when he began to talk about our "mission" and being "pioneers of the new frontier" it got a little too thick for me.

I hadn't come to the Institute of Space Technology to look for glory. I had come for the excellent if commonplace purpose of qualifying for a well-paid job. My father's happy-go-lucky space-rattling was not for me. I intended to do my planetworking with the resources of a neat far southern corporation behind me. Four years in the Garden of Venus—which name, in case you are wondering, is a neat little piece of irony—had left me very sane and practical and disconnected about the whole matter.

I let the President gabble on and began to glance around the auditorium.

I didn't glance far. As I turned my face toward the girl sitting at my left, the woman born, and our eyes met. I managed a smile and coughed an eyebrow toward the speaker's mouth. She smiled back with her eyes and winked her nose. It was a smooth straight nose, and the eyes on each side of it were a clear cool grey, set well apart under level brows. That was Betty—level and straight, and cool, too, for that matter. I didn't realize all that at once, of course. But now I only know that she was calmly and compellingly beautiful, and that I didn't feel sane and practical any more, and certainly not disconnected.

There was a spatter of mildly mechanistic applause, and I resumed the lecture hall again and saw that the President had finished and a youngish instructor was taking the stand to give out information about programs and class requirements. I got down enough to keep from posing

best. I heard him say the sections would be arranged alphabetically. That scared me—suppose this girl was named Wigglesworth or Zitch or some such and I would never see her again! I drew a circle around my name on the class roster they had given each of us at the beginning of the first year and handed it to her. She smiled again and drew a circle around the name right next to it. Berry Day. So that was all right.

THERE is no time for social life at Space Tech. You go there for the training and you get your money's worth. Not that I cared—the work was hard, but it was exciting, and you could see the purpose of it as you went along. I would have worked even harder and not minded, because Berry Day was alongside in every class I took. After a few days we were eating lunch together every day in the campus canteen, which arrangement I liked. It took my mind off the sort of food they served there.

Every two or three weeks we found our took time to see a motion picture, more there is not much else in the way of extracurricular diversion at Tech. It was a very slight luxury, but it meant a good deal to me, and I believed that it did to Berry too. She was always pleased to have me around, and she enabled her nose at my jokes in a special way that she did for no one else, and my jokes were not much better than the average, either.

It was a long time before I tried to tell her about the way I felt. It was not until the thirty years at Tech. were over and the Institute was letting down its hair to the extent of holding our brass with the traditional forced party for graduates known as the Blastoff.

By the time I got there the jewelry had already started. I made a couple of passes at the punch bowl and looked around for Berry. She was out on the floor; I pried her loose from the Joe who was trying to dance with her, and we made one eccentric ellipse around the hall and headed for the terrace. It was cool out there, the uncontaminated coolness of an early summer evening that has not quite forgotten the heat of the day, and there was a bright wash of moonlight on the bay beyond the lights of the town. There was a lot of laughter around.

Berry must have seen it too. She turned toward me, and the solemn look on her face and the way her shoulders glowed in the moonlight and the moonlight glowed in her hair was enough to make your breath come short. My breath, at least. It came right up in my throat and stuck there, and I reached out and we sort of melted together. It was the first time that had happened. That's how hard they work you at Tech.

After a little while we separated and I opened my eyes and they still looked well enough for me to see a bench not far away and we walked over and sat down.

Berry sighed and leaned toward me and I moved my arm out of the way to make room. The skin of her shoulder was smooth to my touch, and cool the way the evening air was cool.

"It's been fun,谭, hasn't it?" I knew she meant the last three years and not just the last three minutes.

"Lots of work and lots of fun," I agreed. "That's why space work gets in your blood, I think. It's fun even when it's hardest. My teeth in the Grade even seem like fun now that it's over."

"I can see how planet work must be a thrill, even if I haven't ever been beyond the moon. I will be though—I'm going out with my crack's Venus expedition in a couple of weeks; you know."

I HADN'T known. I knew she had been talking about it, but I had hoped Ed Day would have sense enough to say so. I wasn't altogether selfish about it. I did want her closer to, nearer where I would be, but a big part of the reason was that the asteroid belt was the Edge, and the Edge has always been a rough place for women, even when it was at the moon.

I started to tell her this, but she interrupted. "How did you make out with Transamer? The men must have had a lot to say to keep you this long."

"I got the money all right. And a job."

"A good one?"

"Six thousand."

"Yes, but what and where?"

"Lane Corp. I'll be part engineer."

"Oh,谭!" I didn't think she had to put so much disappointment in her voice. It was practically certain. "I should think Transamer could do better than that. It's practically headlocked. You aren't going to take it, are you?"

"Why not? Six thousand is a nice tickle of cash, and besides, I got a piece of the company. Not a very big one, but it will grow."

"Oh,谭!" It was just beside this time. "To say the money! You should have a ship. You should be out doing things. They can't make you into a glorified ship monkey on the moon!" She pulled away from my arm and looked at me again. The solemn expression on her face was neither new, or maybe rather; anyway I didn't like it.

"For six thousand they can do worse than that," I said. "It's more than the price of a fine gun. And, anyway, Transamer's ships are all stalled. There wouldn't be a place for me even if I wanted one, and I'm not sure I want one. Maybe there's more pleasure in being a deep-space man, but you can't call the job the engineers do trivial. The idea of being a ship monkey doesn't bother me at all at that pay. It's better than being a swamp hog on Venus."

"But it's such a waste,谭! Anyone can be

an engineer. You should be in research or exploration, and you know it. It's a crime to waste your talent at a desk job. You belong out on the Edge."

"Look, Betty—there are three sorts of Edge jobs in the Petrol, on some sort of an expedition, or as a spacer. The first two don't pay well, at far the third, even if I liked the idea of prospecting the planets, it takes money to outfit for it, and it took all I had to finish Tach."

"But you have the Aspects, and the Transhuman price would be enough to get her into shape again and buy supplies."

"I was given to understand this afternoon that it would be considered very unconventional to take the money and not take the job. And anyway, what would I do then—hang for them in the wreckage? No thanks. I'll take the star monkey job and the salary. And I think you ought to do the same. You could get a job closer in that would pay a lot more than going off to the Belt on a wild goose chase. When your graduate first in your class at Tach, you can take your pick."

"Wild goose chase?" She smiled. "We are going out to get data on the Warp at close range. We might even find out the way to get around it and open up the outer planets to exploration."

THE warp was supposed to be a sort of fourth-dimensional wrinkle in space somewhere beyond the universe that swallowed ships and accounted for the fact that out of three expeditions that had tried to reach Jupiter, there had not returned. I knew better.

"There isn't any Warp," I told her. "My father proved that eight years ago when he made the sweep around Jupiter."

"But he never published any proof, Tom."

"No, all the proof he had was in his log book, and that went with him on his last trip. But I read the log. He sighted the pirate camp on Callana, and would have had pictures to prove it if all his film hadn't been raystruck. Maybe he could have got somebody to listen to him anyway if he had tried a little harder, but he wanted to make a research job of it. He sold out all his claims and built the Astra and headed it up with equipment to bring back all the proof that even the Petrol could ask for. Then he blasted off and no one ever heard of him again."

"But the idea of pirates doesn't make sense, Tom. There are no corpse worlds waiting beyond the Belt. On the Venus run, yes—but why should there be pirates out where there are no ships?"

"Okay, no pirates, then. What they really are is Hareley and all those hungry-on of his that were never accounted for after the Peter War. One of the moons of Jupiter would make a fine hideout for them. Air, water, and kibble chains.

When anyone comes unprepared around, they are to it that they never get back. We blame it on the Warp and stay away and leave them alone."

"They would never get there in the first place. The Warp isn't just somebody's wild guess, you know. It follows from Heisenberg's work. He derived Heide's law from quantum theory, and showed that a warp in space is the only explanation for the family of asteroids between Mars and Jupiter where there should be a single planet. No one can doubt it."

"I can. No one used to doubt that the earth was flat, or to bring it a little more up to date, that the centers of the moons were volcanoes, or that the red shift in the galactic spectra meant that the universe is expanding. A theory is good only as long as it explains all the facts, and Heisenberg overlooked the fact that my father circled Jupiter and came back. He will just have to revise his mathematics."

"Maybe we'll know more about that after the Venus expedition comes back." She smiled and looked out over the glittering bay.

I sighed, too, and took my arm away from the back of the seat. I didn't quite know how the conversation had wandered so far from the point. I had felt you've set up about everything when I came to the party. I thought Betty would be glad about the Transhuman offer, and maybe remark that six thousand credits was a considerable salary for a fresh graduate, and I would suggest that it was enough to get married on. And here we were arguing.

She turned and looked at me again. "Tom," she said softly; maybe I was going to have my chance after all.

"Yes?" I answered.

"Are you really going to take that engineer job? Couldn't you risk Transhuman out of something that would give you the chance to do the things a Denby ought to be doing?"

"Maybe I could. But look—I've seemed out the last seven years just for the chance I've got right now, and I mean to take it. My father spent all his life chasing a dream, and what did it get him? The one great discovery he did make no one will even believe."

"I never met Lenox Denby, but I know he was a great spaceman, Tom, even if you do mean to have forgotten it. I never thought a son of his would ever turn out to be a company man. Let's go inside."

We went inside, and I went home. The porch board was empty by now so I didn't even stop.

IT WAS probably a mistake, but I flew down to Mojave Outpost the day the Venus Expedition blasted off. Betty was very friendly when we said goodbye, and her hand in mine was small and firm, and the fingers were quite cold. I don't remember what I said. It couldn't have been much. There was a stiff feeling around my lips that it was hard to push any words through.

Berry was lost on board. She named and looked back for a few seconds before they started the launch, and it seemed to me that there was the same solemn expression on her face that I had seen that night on the terrace. I was too far away to be sure.

My interview with the Western manager of Transamerica was scheduled for the next day. I'm afraid I made a poor impression from the very start. I wasn't looking very sharp; instead of sleepless I had spent a good part of the night wondering about that look in Betty's eyes. That and a few other things.

Ekens, the manager, was the sort of man who wears a nice sharp crease in his pants and his hair brushed carefully over his bald spot and calls everyone brightly by his first name.

"Well, Tom," he said repeatedly, after the formalities of introduction and exchange of cigarettes were out of the way, "let's get to business. First of all, that, ah—column."

He held out a sheet. The four figures on it were even prettier than the pretty-colored ink they were printed in. That was for me. Luckily, by the terms of their price offer, I had checked on that.

"Thank you," I said.

"And now, as concerns your place with the Transamerica organization—"

I interrupted. "I'm sorry, Mr. Ekens. Personal plans make it impossible for me to accept the position you have so generously offered me."

That rocked him. Why not—that rocked me. He still smiled with his lips, out of habit, but his eyes weren't smiling. He pulled an ash tray to him and crushed out his cigarette—the one I had given him.

"Excuse! You realize this is most irregular, Mr. Denby! And unexpected."

"I do. I didn't know it myself until a little while ago."

"Is this decision final, Mr. Denby?"

"I'm afraid it is."

"Very well. I'm sorry to hear it." His tone meant that I would be sorry, too. "In that case there is nothing further to say."

He pushed a button and a flunky came in to sweep me out. As I left I could as good as see him winking down my name on a sheet marked Blackie in 70-point type.

III

IT took three months to make the Aspera apocryphally again, and when I had bought the divided tele-camera, visagazer, and the other little toys I would need to prove that there was a pretty hollow in Callisto, my bank account was within striking distance of absolute zero. This was space-running for fun, without even a chance for paydirt at the end of the orbit. And Transamerica, or any other outfit, wouldn't have

me even in a swamp bog after that. I was the smart jek who was going to leave me a Career.

You never know.

I stopped at Plodon to fill up on reactant. I didn't mean to land on Callisto. I didn't even mean to be sure if I could help it, but with I might have some dodging to do, and fuel tanks could be nice to have. For the same reason I got in a new power slug, because the mission had begun to go a little soft on the way out from Luna City. With the salvage of the old one, that left me just enough for a couple of high-balls at the port customs. I thought I needed them more than two loose coins. I left the slag monkey grumbling about having to roost around among the obsolete parts to find a Group VI slug, and headed for the bar. Let him grumble. The Aspera was still a good ship, even if she didn't have the razzle-dazzle to make it handle Group IV locomotion.

What a minute! Maybe he got tired of roosting and put in a Group IV slug just out of laziness and ignorance. I made my way back to the power shack, cracked the case, and took a look through the periscope. The IV on the can was in top as a house. Well, when I got back I would be able to prove to Betty that I was right about trained personnel not being wanted in the engineering department if I got back.

Seven and a half years in a space can is a horrible thought, but to do it in free fall is one of the questions. I swung a pair of morning rubber to impact position and cranked up enough cobwebs to give me a few pounds of weight. That made a mess out of the visual screen, but the rubber would still let me know if anything came close enough to worry about, and this way a cup of coffee would at least stay in the cup. I brewed a pot of it, stuffed a pipe full of cobwebs, and started to settle down to do my time.

I don't know how many days later it was that the rubber began to groan. I quit counting days after the first week—if I needed the day I could get it off the chronograph. The signal was feeble, but I took the rest off her to get a fix on what it was. The rubber gave the surge as accurate—surely a million miles—and anything that would trip the relay at that range must be big. After a few swings I found it in the scope, and it showed a perceptible disk. That meant an asteroid. I didn't know which one—the General Requirements of the asteroid hasn't been published yet.

DURING the next day or two I spent a good deal of my time at the scope, and most of the rest figuring others. It was pleasant to have something to do to keep my mind off my predicament. I hardly needed even when it became obvious that I would come so close to the asteroid as to be perturbed out of all possibility of making the contact with Mars that I had projected. I hadn't really believed in that anyway.

And, when I discovered that I was in a collision orbit, it was more of a relief than otherwise. Get it over with in a hurry. Scramble in a slow and tedious way to blast off. A short life and a merry one, Deady, that's what you always said. Or did you? Well, it doesn't matter, you're going to get it anyway.

It was a fine sight. I don't know anything more impressive to watch than a planet, even a little two-hundred-mile chunk of rock like this one, swinging up out of empty space and taking on size and form. White and round as a snowball, and spinning lazily like a marshall thrown through the air. That one was going to hit me right on the back.

The twelve-hour rotation of the asteroid must have swung the spot past me three or four times before I paid any attention to it. A black smudge it was, round, but with ragged edges like a sea-fish. A jet smudge if I ever saw one. I swallowed my stomach on the third pass, and as soon as I stopped being dizzy I looked again. A jet smudge it was, and a few hundred yards away the sunlight glittered on a round lump that couldn't be anything but a Mitchell blaster. Of all the rocks in the Belt, I would bump into one with a station on it. Nice work, Deady!

I crawled into the bulge again as once I might set her down a little heavy, and got at the controls. Landing on the moving job is tricky, especially when there is no atmosphere to help you bridle down. I never would have made it if it had been a full-sized planet.

I set her down heavy, all right, but I'm not ashamed of it. Try it yourself some time. We crashed in a gully some sixty feet deep, about a mile from the station. The shock broke my belt and threw me against the control panel, and I felt a couple of ribs crack. That was cheap. When my head cleared a little I could hear rocks rattling on the belt and air whistling out through a hole in her somewhere. I made a dash for the lock and kicked the emergency hatch release and blew outside with the rest of the air.

Just in case. Looking up, I could see the whole side of the cliff coming loose and toppling toward me like the crest of a breaker. I pulled my teeth and jumped. When I looked back there was nothing to see but a heap of rock.

Under this light gravity, the leap took me well above the cliff. I could see a glint of sunlight on the Mitchell in the distance, and a speckman-chid figure coming over the surface in long leaps. One jump had been enough for me—I hung onto my ribs and did my best to walk. That isn't easy with a gravity a couple of hundredths Earth normal, but at least when you fall you don't hit very hard.

In a minute or two I came up with my wrench, and we touched helmets to talk. I moved through the footprints of the other suit. "Hello, Barry," I said. Then I poked out.

WHEN I woke up someone was snubbing my face with a damp cloth. It was very pleasant. I opened my eyes, and it was Barry, all right.

"Hello yourself," she said, and smiled. It was the old uncle, crinkled nose and all. I sat back when I had told myself about being a fool. I sat up and reached out my arms, but the ribs got in the way.

"Toni!" she cried. "What's the matter?"

"I bent a couple of ribs a little too far," I answered. "Nothing vital."

"Here, let me help!"

Between us we pulled the bulge off me and got rid of my pocket and shirt. Barry crossed the room and began to rearrange my pockets. I looked around. I was on a landing car in one of the simplest cubicles of a Mitchell. Apparently Barry had carried me in after I collapsed. That was not as bad as it sounds—I only weighed three or four pounds here, and I was light-headed besides. The old girl with the spinning wheel seemed to have changed their minds after they blew my jet for me. They used me as a record, and it comes near enough to land on mine or less and there is a party on it, and it is the Day expedition, including Barry. Thanks, girl! I would have bowed to them, but on account of my ribs I only nodded.

Barry came back with a pair of slippers and a roll of plaster, cut loose my undercoat, and began bandaging a waistcoat. I worried my stomach from the fact that it would have to come off some time.

"Where's your uncle and the rest of the crew?" I asked.

"Everyone but me is off on a field trip to Thule. Opposition was a week or two ago, and they're due back any time. Thule seems to be our last chance. We haven't found out a thing so far. But Thule is half-way to Jupiter from here and right on the edge of the Warp, or where the Warp ought to be. If they don't bring back some significant data from there we may begin to think you are right after all and there isn't any such thing."

"I know it all along," I informed her. "Not that I'm likely to have a chance to prove it, with the Aspero dead and hoisted."

"He will a minute—how are I going to tape you up if you keep on talking? Blow out your breath!" She ripped off half a meter of tape and slapped it onto my side.

Protruding she stopped back to inspect the job. "It'll do, I guess," she said, frowning critically. "For the time being, anyway. Uncle Ed will be back in a couple of days, and he can fix it right."

"Oh no he can't. When this comes off it stays off."

"Why Toni! Are you afraid of a little tape?"

"You bet I am. Give me a jet-burn any day."

"All right then." She poked up my shirt and began helping me into it. "But if you grow up

liped or chicken-breasted, don't blame me!" I didn't pay any attention. I tried my arms again, and they cracked out all right. It was a good job of tapping.

She pushed me away and stood up. "Careful of your ribs, master," she warned. "Come on, you don't belong in here anyway—this is the woman's side."

I hunched myself into my arket and followed her through the door and down a short passage which led into a sort of utility room in the mid-section of the blaster. One end was taken up with shelves and cases of food and other supplies, a duthurn cooler, distillation unit, mess table and the like, and the other, to the sides of the air lock, were two or three desks with books and papers. One of the desks held a periscope which reflected the sun-spangled black of space and a small bright ball which was the distant sun. A row of thick glass portholes at each end of the room let in a fair amount of light.

OUT in the center of the floor were several chairs which looked almost comfortable, and a large table with a ping-pong net on it. The thought of trying to punish the behavior of a ping-pong ball under gravity of point-a-two or threeabouts made me dizzy again.

I sat down in the easiest-looking chair and Betty took a seat opposite me. The welcome look was on her face again.

"I should have mentioned it before," she apologized, "but I am glad to see you, Tam. And amazed, of course. What happened to your job at Transducer?"

"Transducer doesn't like me any more. I took the prize money to fit out the Aspera and secured it the job."

"Oh, Tam!" I liked the way she said it this time. "Then you are free-lancing?"

"Free is the word for it. The last they put me on is black as the night side of Pluto. No outfit in space would hire me for a swapper after this. And you can't swapper without a ship to sit on. As a matter of fact, I have a great future behind me. All because I had a great idea."

"What was the idea, Tam? I know you didn't come all the way out here just to talk to me."

"Well, it would have been worth it, but that wasn't it. I was on my way to Jupiter to prove once and for all that there isn't any Wump and that there are planets on Colinto. Then I broke down a few hours out of Mars, with too much velocity to get back on the chronoch. After a while you came along, and I saw the ship, and managed to set her down. I didn't know this was your work."

"You have the queerest ideas, Tam!"

"All right, but it goes. I'm done with crazy ideas. The wildest one I have at the moment is to talk your uncle into thinking that I can earn my keep here and a passage back to Earth."

"Good—and I'll talk him into not sending you back with the Patrol."

"The Patrol?"

"Yes—our time here is half gone, and they are due any day to pick up our data and preliminary report. They're overdue right now, as a matter of fact. I thought you were the Patrol cruiser at first. Our figures are hardly worth carrying over, unless they've got some good readings on Thule."

I had stopped listening. Patrol regulations make the career of distressed specimens mandatory. They would take me to Earth and turn me loose with a hundred credits bonus, and I could look for a job as a short astronomer. Or write my memoirs. The Tale of a Disappointed Space Hound. That ought to sell. Back to Earth. I wasn't happy about it. I had covered four hundred million miles of space to find Betty and I wanted to stay.

I looked at her. She smiled her nose at me and stood up. "Come on, Tam, don't look so glum. How about something to eat? If you're not hungry I am."

She crossed to the galley and of the room, and I followed. Cooking was simple—stick a couple of corns in the duthurn and wait until the sprout popped. It tasted better than what I had had on the Aspera, though. I told her so, and Betty laughed. Then suddenly she jumped to her feet.

"Look, on the screen, Tam!" She pointed. There was a bright streak half-filling the field of the periscope. Betty turned across the room and I got up as quickly as I could and followed her.

"It must be the Patrol ship!" she cried. "They will have letters aboard, and newspapers!" She was practically dancing with excitement. I wasn't so happy.

We watched her coast in. She was a small ship, not much larger than the Aspera, but it was a spectacular sight at that. An open-jet blast in space is quite a blaze of glory.

They had a sharp led at the controls. He had to be—I could tell from the shape and color of the blast that the mission was safe as a raw egg. He must have had twenty per cent illumination. That was queer—you'd think the Patrol would have beams and money enough to put in a new power play when it was needed. That one could go down any time. But the plot was good. He set down easy, right in the center of the screen.

As soon as she was down, the hatch swung open and half a dozen men in badgers stepped out and flopped to the ground. Betty had the outer air lock door open for them already. They crossed the ground quickly, in the long leaps of men accustomed to low gravity.

I noticed suddenly that the palms of my hands were damp. That made me wonder. It wasn't so much that I was afraid by the idea of going back to Earth with the Patrol. Something was

wrong with the set-up somewhere, and I couldn't place it. Then it hit me. That ship out there was no Percol cruiser—she was the Astra! My father's ship! It had been years ago and I was just a kid at the time, but there was no chance of a mistake—I had practically lived aboard that wagon all the while she was on the ways. That meant my father had found the hideout on Calhoun again, and he'd not got away this time. The Astra had been captured and converted to a pirate ship. As for my father, there was no doubt now about what had happened to him. Loose Dandy would never have been taken alive.

These are men crossing the ground toward us with a bunch of Hunsley's cut-throats.

"Benny!" I yelled. "Shoot the lock quick!"

She threw me a startled look, but ignoring to obey, it was too late.

IV

THEY were in. All big monkeys with their bellows peeled back, and every one with a blaster in his hand you could put your thumb in. They came in first and fanned out to cover the room in a way that showed they knew their business, and the muzzles of their weapons never wavered an inch. I looked at Benny. She was quite pale. It didn't matter about the lock. We couldn't have kept them out anyway.

I didn't have a chance to tell her so. The boss of the show spoke. "Over against the wall," he said. Quietly, but we went. It was that kind of voice. There was no tone to it, and not much volume. It reminded me of the noise we used to make by rubbing rocks together under water when we were kids. He grinned, exposing thirty or forty grayish teeth shaped like old-fashioned tomatoes. His whole face was greenish and stony, with heavy brows and a thick jaw. The man on blaster in his hand looked like a water pistol. I might have called it a slight case of acromegaly, but I was not interested in diagnosis at the moment. I was busy getting mad. That was easy enough with such a subject, but I didn't see what I was going to do about it.

He followed us over to the wall, waiting slowly, not cautiously, but as if he knew there was no need to hurry.

"Where's the rest of the crew?" he asked. He looked at me.

"That's all there is," I said. "There isn't any more." I didn't see any use in lying to him, but I didn't see any use in telling him the truth, and I would answer him to him than not. That's the way I felt about it.

"What, huh?" he said. His expression didn't change. He didn't have any expression.

He turned to Benny. "Where's the rest of the crew?"

"There aren't any more. That's just the way of us." Good girl. She was going to back my

play. If I had my play, I was trying, but looking at that face showed my mind down one first gear. Back to me again. "Where's your ship?"

"Ship?" I asked. The innocent line. "We don't have a ship."

He looked toward the rest of his gang. Two of them came up alongside of me and guided my elbows.

"Do you hear that?" he complained. "They don't have any ship. They walked all the way out here." He turned in close to me. His face wasn't really sick or I could have seen the man on it.

"Look, dummy," he said. "Do you have to get wise? This ain't no game of marbles. I'm telling you."

"Take it or leave it," I cracked. "What would we want with a ship? They lining us out here and leave us, and a year later they come back to get us and drop off the new crew." It sounded like a good way to run an ocean station at that.

He cursed. It had a horrible sound, in that muted rocky voice of his. He faced Benny again. "That true?"

"Of course it's true!" The concept in his voice would have welcomed him, only some don't within.

I still couldn't see where we were getting Hold him here until the Percol crew came in? That wouldn't work. If the Percol boat came to first they would think the Astra was the expedition ship, and Ed Day would think it was the Percol. And Somebody here would sit back just like a hunter in a duck blind and wait for an easy shot. If we could figure out some way to signal. Come on, Dandy, think it out. There's no answer to everything.

He was talking again. "How long have you been here?"

"Six months."

"Where's that ship due?"

"In six months more."

"How long?" This was to Benny.

"Five months and twenty-three days, to be exact," she told him. "Earth time."

He cursed again. I was cursing. The way Benny was following my lead, the more thank I had a plan. Maybe I did, so that. It was pretty busy, but the way Stony kept worrying about a ship made me think. That, and the wobbly jet I had seen.

"Six months, huh?" he asked. "Well, we can wait. It won't be bad. Not with the company we'll have." He put one of his big shovel-shaped hands on Benny. "No, not bad at all."

I gripped one elbow loose and swung at his jaw. I might have done better if it hadn't been for the ribs, but as it was I felt it all the way up to my shoulder. His head snapped back but his feet never moved. The two guards grabbed my hands and twisted them up under my shoulder blades.

OLD waxy stood for a minute rubbing his eyes and looking at me. Just looking. It was a look like you might see in the eye of a snake. Then he let me in the clerk with the flat of his hand. It wasn't a slap. I tasted blood. He swung around his feet at my ankle, and I hit the floor. He swung it again. I felt another rib let go.

"Pick him up," he said. "The fun is just about." His boys did as they were told.

He came and stood in front of me. "I told you this wasn't no game of marbles. Now look, chum. You're going to be a good boy and keep your trap shut and do like I tell you or I'm going to take you apart. That's going to be fun, too, only not for you." I didn't say anything.

Someone moved around on his stool and began grating out orders. "Glas and Joker, you tie up the girl till I decide what to do with her. Tubby, see what they've got to eat in this shack. Tigger—back to the ship and tell the boys we'll release them in an hour and they're to keep their eyes open in the meantime. Bring back a couple of bottles of juice with you. Kares, you keep a red on this monkey in case he didn't understand what I told him."

In a few minutes they were all sitting around the main table waiting down about a week's supply of Expedition rations with one piece. When they had finished Sissy belched vigorously, stood up, and walked over to look out of one of the portholes. I followed him with my eyes, and was surprised to see that it was night outside. I hadn't realized how short these six-hour days would be. Sissy began talking again.

"Glas, you and Kares get back to the ship and let the other boys come over here and stretch their legs and get some sleep. After that we all got to get busy and check the ship and set up the artillery on the ground to get ready for that Patrol boat when it shows up. Me, I got some other business on hand."

We walked over to Barry and picked her up under our feet, chair and all.

"Put the girl down!" I told him.

He set her down on the deck again and came at me, bailing up one of his coldest stare. "I said I was going to take you apart if you didn't sit nice," he snarled. "Well, two goes!"

"Wait a minute," I said. "I know what you want and I know where to get it."

Tubby stopped him. "What do you mean?" he growled.

"I mean a new power plug. I saw how sloppy your job was when you came in. You haven't got one G-beer left. You ought take off three a little rock like that, but you'd never make Venus again and you know it. That's why you're willing to wait around here for six months in the slim chance of being able to shoot down a Patrol cruiser and salvage a plug out of it."

He blinked when I mentioned Venus, but I didn't let him set I noticed it. My mind was beginning to check over. This wasn't the way

I would have preferred to handle the women, but I didn't see anything else to do.

Sissy ground her teeth at me. "What?"

"I know where you can get a new plug just for picking it up."

One of his heads started out and wringed around my neck, and he started shaking. "Where is it, child?" he growled. "Out with it!"

"I didn't say I was going to tell you," I reminded him, as soon as I started breathing again. "I'm willing to talk about it, though."

"The listening. But . . . but, damn!"

"Can the girl leave, and me too?"

Someone waved a command, and in a moment we were running the circulation back into our veins. Barry wasn't looking at me.

"Here's my proposition," I said. "I'll trade you the plug for the girl. You give her a suit with full hands and weapons and turn her loose now. That will give her enough start so you won't be able to find her. Then in the morning I'll show you where that plug is, and as soon as you get it you take off and we'll all be happy. That gives you a six months' wait and a fight with the Patrol."

"Total!" Barry broke out. "You're not going to let those apes get away!"

"Sorry, Barry. It's the only way."

"Oh, you—" She stamped her foot. She was crying. I couldn't blame her for being mad. She was not the kind to stop fighting anywhere that one of the last ditch. Well, for me it was the last ditch when he put his hand on her.

"Can the dames, you two," Sissy growled.

"Look, how do I even know you got a plug?"

"You don't," I agreed. "That's the chance you take."

"Yeah. And you know the chance you're taking if you don't produce!"

"I can imagine," I snarled him.

"Okay," he decided. "I'll play. But I'm warning you, chum, if you're trying to run a bluff—you'll be sorry!" He turned to Barry. "Come on, babe, climb into your rubber pants and screw!"

Sissy didn't even glance in my direction while she was putting on her space-suit. She gave me one look as she went out through the air lock, and one was enough. It was pure poison.

V

I WAS glad before morning that the nights on Venus were only six hours long. Soon after Barry left, a couple of Sissy's gorillas went over to the ship and took back the two that had been left on watch. The new ones weren't any prettier to look at, and they coughed up just as big a share of rations as the others had, and with even ten minutes, if possible. After that one of them got out a deck of monkey-looking cards, and the whole crew sat down to a game of poker.

They had me tied down on the chest again by this time, and after the second bottle of juice had been around once or twice they let on the queer idea of using me for stakes. Each winner of a pot was to have the right to choose which portion of my anatomy he would separate from the rest of me by force and violence as soon I didn't come through with the power slip in the morning.

By the time they had reached the stage of snickering out their respective territories with sticks, Stoney made them quit. He told them that when he got through with me there wouldn't be enough left for them to argue about.

My ribs weren't doing me any good, either. . .

Someone was cuffing me on the head. I opened my eyes and it was bright day.

"On your feet," Stoney growled. "You and me have got a date for a little game of truth or consequences. Remember?"

I staggered up and scrubbed some of the fatigue out of my face with my hands. Someone shoved a bucket at me. I saw that it was mine, and the tanks and pump lines were full. I crawled in and clamped down the fiddler.

I laid the way into the lock, with Stoney and several of his lack at my heels. In a minute the lock clicked and I opened the door and stepped outside. The sun was only a couple of degrees high and the long shadows of the blinder and the ship lay sharp and dark across the grey-white terrain. The stars burned against the black sky, very remote and indifferent. I tried to swallow the dryness in my mouth and throat, but it wouldn't go down.

A wedge from the muzzle of a blinder brought me back to the business at hand. I set off across the rocks, taking it as easy as I could without making my concepts too important. I headed straight for the Aurora. No need stifling now. Halfway there had time to hide behind by now as it didn't matter.

When we pulled up at the scene of the wreck and I pointed to the pile of boulders and gravel that had the remains of the ship, I thought Stoney was going to share me out amongst his own without stopping to argue. I managed to show him a corner of best hell plate sticking out of the rubble just in time. He put the boys to work tearing rocks.

It took a long time. I had counted on that. By the time the air lock was clear the sun was half-way down the sky again, Jacking the slag out of the reaction chamber and getting it into its bed gas was slow work, too. While it was going on Stoney and I waited in the cabin, along with Kerna. It seemed the boys fancied him as a gun pointer.

I had a hard time to manage to retrieve my hand system from the corner where it had fallen without attracting their attention, but I made it. I stuffed it into my pocket pouch and nobody made any objection.

Except for that, Stoney had played it smart all along. The only other mistake he made was at the end, when his gang came back into the cabin with the slag all snaggled down at its shoold. He let me crawl out first. It was black dark outside by now, and I jumped without even waiting to get to my feet. And this time I kept on jumping.

THEY didn't spend much time trying to find me. I was out of range of their headlights in two leaps, and why would Stoney think it made any difference to have me floating in the dark, with no weapons? Of course he would have blamed me down before he took off if I had been on hand—I wasn't fooling myself about that—but he had too good a head for the mean chance to waste time on such a minor pleasure. The way he had it figured, Betty and I would both be dead long before another ship reached Vorta, and even if we weren't, we would say we were killed by Venusian pirates, and he would be long gone.

They headed straight back to the ship, and Stoney put as many of his crew as weren't needed for changing slugs to loading the blinder. I could see their lights going back and forth for an hour, and then they all crawled into the ship and buttoned down.

I figured they wouldn't leave the blinder standing, and I was right. One RR shell took care of that. Then they blasted off. I had my sextant and watch on three, and was writing down data on my knee-pad as fast as I could take them. I was using Atlas and Vega for a fix, and throwing in Polaris every now and then for good measure. I kept it up most of the night. Their jet-flare washed out suddenly just before I lost them over the horizon.

After that there was nothing to do but go back to where the blinder used to be and wait.

Betty came in just after the sun lifted over the horizon. She wouldn't let me get close enough to touch helmets so that I could explain. I gave up after a few attempts and we just sat.

It was a long wait. I rummaged around in the debris and ripped up some fair-wood sheets of dural to keep off the sun—as for me and one for Betty. At least she was willing to use it. After a while I poked around some more and found a copy of Spatial Navigation Tables that weren't completely reduced to confusion, and started trying to work up my figures.

About noon the next day, Vorta came, we picked up the jet-flare of a ship breaking in. She came in fast, under about three G's of acceleration. Then looked like Petrol style to me, and sure enough, as soon as the dust settled, I could see the hint star on her nose. That was good. I was afraid it might be the expedition ship coming back, and gone were indicated for the next hour in this game.

We didn't even wait for them to get out the ladder. Betty leaped for the port as soon as they

cracked the hatch, and I was right after her. I slammed the hatch shut and motioned the landing party back inside. The shavetail in charge wasn't happy about it, but I didn't give him a chance to object. In a minute he got the idea that I meant business, and opened the main door.

I peered back my helmet. "Where's the CO?"

"Right here!" said a voice at my elbow. I turned and looked. He was only medium-sized, but he had a hard jaw and a hard eye. "What's going on here?"

"Twenty is going on!" That was Betty. "Droids took over the expedition here, and this man gave them a power slug to make their getaway."

"That up?" I told her. "Let me tell this to in master's room."

"Master's room! Does it make sense to let these things off scot-free, with eighteen hours head start? We'll never catch them!"

"Yes we will. And besides, if I'd let them stay, they would have blasted this ship out of the sky. And besides that, I had to give them something to let you know—"

"Suppose you both shut up," the CO suggested, "and come up to the bridge and let me have the straight of this."

The three of us went into the control cabin which was unoccupied at the moment. The CO motioned us to chairs. We peeled off our helmets and sat down.

"Now—Miss Day, I believe? I'm Allison, Commander, in charge. Let's have your version."

BETTY gave him the story of all that had happened since I landed on Vesta, and enough of the background to make the story clear as far as she knew it. Allison looked for the medical officer when she got to the part about my ribs, and I was untaped and taped again. I was glad enough by now to have someone else worrying about them for while besides me.

Aside from that he made no comment until Betty had finished. Then he turned on me, and his eye was harder than ever.

"Well, Deady? I realize that you're not sworn in as a Paroleman, and I suspect you thought you were acting disloyally. But it's rather a troubling that all spacemen consider themselves unofficial deputies of the Planet when the common sense, and it seems to me that even a civilian might have kept his mouth shut about that ship. As for their shooting us out of the sky, we would have something to say about that. We know how to operate against land batteries."

"I don't doubt that," I answered him. "But I think you'll agree that a ship in space with no drive is as good as up."

"No drive? What do you mean?"

"Just that. Spazzy and his boys are sitting out in space with a blown tube waiting for you to come along and pick them up. If you want to

know exactly where give those figures to your navigator and let him flash them on the computer. I've got a fix on them for every ten minutes from blastoff to the time their main drive tube blew four hours and forty-three minutes later."

"How do you know their tube blew? I never heard of such a thing."

"Booster, I did! And if you don't know how fast a Group IV slug can chew the guts out of a propellant liner, just ask me. But those kids didn't know. When they left Earth at the end of the Polar War, Group IV dynamites weren't heard of, not named. When I gave them the Group IV slug that the ground crew gave me by mistake on Phoenix, they didn't know the difference."

I looked at Betty, and so help me, she was crying again.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I couldn't tell you what the score was before without tipping them off."

She came over and took hold of my hand. She didn't say anything, but then she didn't need to.

Allison was putting buttons like mad, and the bridge began to look like a sub-sea train at rush hour. When the navigator came in the CO handed him my notes.

"Figure an interception orbit from these observations. Blastoff is seventy minutes."

"Haw, sergeant, take a detail and lay out a target panel for the Day Expedition when they return, and this morning to tell them what happened and where we've gone. Quagley! This was the crew, I gathered; all hands to spacesuiting—blastoff at once."

"Deady, I thank you and Miss Day had better come along with us. I imagine you've both had enough of helpme for a while, and I think you might like to be in on the end of this. Right?"

I peeled some of Betty's hair out of my eyes and looked up.

"Right!" I said. "I have a personal matter to settle with Scorchface. And anyway, I want to be along to see you don't shoot up Aorta too bad. She was Lancer Deady's ship, you know, and she's mine now, and I'm going to need her if I'm going to be the first spaceman on the ground on the moons of Jupiter."

Allison goggled at that, but made a quick recovery. "Okay, Deady. And you know there's a reward out for Hensley or any of his group. I think that will take care of my report."

The navigator came back from the computer and handed Allison a sheet of paper. "That's your course, in Quagley's interception in thirty-three hours. They were headed for Jupiter, all right."

"There goes your Warp," I glared.

"Looks like it," Allison agreed. "Here, here a cigarette."

I took it and lit it up. It was quagles, and it tasted good.

By Alfred E. Maxwell

Alpha Say, Beta Do

Prudence Dayle Tindar and prim Kay Kanton had themselves duplicated, standard practice for trouble-shooting in space. But the duplicates fell in love—and what happened then was neither practice nor standard!

DOYLE TINDAR was awakened by the urgent buzzing of the voice-phones by his bed. He grumbled, rolled over, glanced at the vireophone and winced as he saw the list, cast face of the Control Board Director, Sam Penser. He sat up, yawned, and snipped the set on.

"Yeah?"

"Listen, Tindar," Penser boomed and Tindar turned the volume down. "We've got a large pile of trouble. No reports from the station on Boken last night. Automatic radio communication absolutely dead. Power plant may have caught a motor, but it would have to be a large one. Telescope won't tell us anything. Get out there, will you?"

"Say, I'm on vacation, if you don't mind," Tindar said. "What about Bedding? Or Tupper?"

"Bedding's on a honeymoon, damn him," Penser growled, "and Tupper's getting some new work planned. It has to be you."

"Miss Kanton's going out there tomorrow," Tindar smiled, not shifting a spare top since he was on his first vacation in a year.

"Tre thought of that," Penser boomed back. "She couldn't report fully on the state of affairs. She's a meter-reader. Scarcely a control-room worker. Nothing to do with the power plant or the aerial masts."

"Okay," Tindar sighed, "I'll get on it. I'll leave Jimmy Field this afternoon. Do I get a bonus?"

"Yeah, you thief," Penser snarled, "but get duplicated. You'll have enough work for two men."

"Okay."

"And, Tindar—" Penser signaled him to stay on the air—"I've just thought of something. Miss Kanton had better go to Boken with you. Might as well clean up the whole mess at once."

"Okay," Tindar said, yawned and shut the set off.

He climbed out of bed very slowly and shuffled across the room in a pair of fuzzy slippers. He went to the bathroom, urinal and drank a stimulant to snap him out of his stupor. He lit a cigarette and rummaged around in his closet until he found his sport-suit.

Since Miss Kanton was going to be on the trip with him, the job was more attractive. He stared about the very nice-looking Miss Kanton for a moment, then began dressing hurriedly. He'd have to get down to the duplication lab before the noon rush.

WASHED, dried in the space-suit he wanted his duplicate to wear, and considerably more awake, Tindar stood before the reception desk of the Central Commercial Duplication Laboratories of North America with his governmental certificate of permission for his "duping." The white-uniformed woman receptionist studied his certificate, handed him an identification disc and waved him on. She pressed a button on the desk and the information about him was wired to the other sections.

An attendant met and ushered him down a long, cool, white corridor to the section of the building devoted to the duplication of living matter. Another attendant took him from the

feet and whisked him up in an elevator to the floor where, as the number sign stated, "Duplication of the Human Being" was carried on. He was directed to a pneumatic chair in the waiting room and he sat down.

Tinder had never ceased to wonder at the marvellous work done in this immense building, which most people, over the course of its last hundred years of its use, had come to consider a natural part of the bustling, scientific world. C.D. Labs, holding a near-absolute monopoly on the process, could duplicate anything composed of atoms and smaller than a three-starred dwelling in a matter of minutes. The products of such duplication existed only for a period of about eighty hours, but it had proved to be a tremendously undemanding device in duplicating oil and coal for immediate use; in duplicating the bodies of persons undergoing operations for diseases before the operation; for creating microbes of diseases and varying their effects upon the body, after which they would conventionally disappear; and for duplicating persons whose talents or brains were needed briefly for special problems. This last use had been a great aid to industries by providing living, breathing, duplicates of specially trained men in times of need; which times were frequent since the peoples of earth were spread so thinly over seven planets and thousands of asteroids.

A nurse came into the waiting-room with a glass of brown fluid on a tray. Tinder, no longer as dupliant as, smiled at its name in recognition, took the glass and drank it down. It was a sedative that would put him deeply to sleep in a few minutes, so that he could be pleasantly oblivious to the slight discomfort of the duplication cell.

He followed the nurse into the "Dupe" room and ran a further eye over the shining and ponderous equipment. He knew the theory exactly. Space, warped, formed positive and negative fields. These fields, subjected to wringing and energy changes, formed various matter, unstable and durable. Warped again, the inchoate matter formed into molecular substances identical with the pattern electrically projected into it. Whatever was placed in the primary chamber was passed back and forth at every possible angle by a thousand different types of rays and emanations from the energy sources about the primary chambers. These rays were then the energy directed into the swirling haze of nascent matter. An identical object would take form in about five minutes time and the product's differences from the "pattern object" could not be detected by the strongest microscope.

"Simple," the man in the next night said. Tinder, more familiar with the theory of operation, was also more cognizant of the hundreds and hundreds of years of research upon which the theory was based. He had always held a tremendous respect for the scientists who fashioned the amazing invention.

Tinder climbed up onto the pneumatic cot and was slipped into the primary cylinder. He was slipping slowly into the nest of sleep as the door of the primary chamber clanked softly behind him. He gazed for a moment at the thousand lens-eyes on the ceiling with alarm. The eyes suddenly shone with all the colors of the spectrum and bathed his body in a wavel and roiled members of heterogeneous rays . . .

TWO Tinder awoke strongly and sat up on the pneumatic cot. They saw that the cot had been moved and settled against another in a corner of the room. They looked at one another.

"What's who?" one of them asked.

"We'll have to wait for the attendant," the other shrugged. It was said. That was practically all you ever had to say to yourself.

Down the hall they slipped rapidly on the floor and approached the "Dupe" chamber. A uniformed attendant looked into the room and waved at them frantically with a trembling hand.

"Don't get off your cots, please, sir," he quavered and was gone.

The Tinders stared at one another.

"Something novel," they both said.

"Listen to the bell they're raising in the other room," one said, breaking the identity of their thought stream.

Voice-phones were buzzing; at least a dozen voices were raised in a furious discussion. Another voice could be heard, pleading and distraught. More attendants ran up and down the hall before the "Dupe" chamber. Three uniformed men, with faces as white as their uniforms rushed through the waiting-room and faced the Tinders.

"Dr. Bransley will be here in a moment, sir," one of them said.

"What's the matter?" one of the Tinders asked.

"Dr. Bransley will be here presently, sir," the attendant repeated.

Dr. Bransley came into the room with a roll-up of flattened documents. He nodded to the Tinders and worked his legs around as he waited for a pale little man to shuffle nervously into the room.

"Now, Endicott, how did you treat the cot accident? Try to remember." The doctor spoke with a fatherly air to the little man.

"I don't know . . . I was thinking of something else," Endicott whined. "I was polishing the floors. They have to be cleaned by ten o'clock. I was working with the mops on the floors. I moved the cot to get them out of my road. I thought they were identified."

"Thought!" asserted Dr. Bransley. "Since when does a cleaned floor think?"

"The mops, Dr. Bransley," the little man pleaded. "It's a rule. The floors have to be cleaned . . ."

"It is also a rule—a primary rule, Tadlock, that identification of the 'patient' is second only to the welfare of the 'patient,'" the doctor stressed. He gazed wildly in silence for a few minutes, then burst out again: "Get out! I will not have men in my world! Get out! You're dead!"

The little men shuffled obediently out. One Tindar turned to Dr. Bromley.

"What's the story?" he asked.

The doctor gestured the rest of his insistence and attendants out and closed the door. He worked his lips nervously for a few seconds.

"An unprecedented occurrence has blackened the record of Commercial Dehydration. You shall have a perfect right to sue, but I'm sure that President Hauer will settle satisfactorily with you out of court." He paused as if it were painful to go on. "That statement—that double, double damned fool has misled you up before you were strapped. One assumes the controller is out of the room and he does it! We have no means in our power now to tell which of you is the duplicate and which is the original. We have one hope. Perhaps one of you woke up before you were removed from the chamber? Perhaps one of you remembers which duplicate he was in?"

"The last thing I recall is doing off in the privacy," one Tindar said.

"Same here," the other said.

"That is indeed regrettable!" boomed the doctor. "It's unheard of!"

"It's not that serious, doctor," one of the Tindars said. "We can still do our work. One of us shall drop out on the way back, that's all. The only inconvenience shall be having to bring the duplicate part of the way back."

"But who shall be your ruler?" the doctor asked. "If on the way back the one piloting the ship were to disappear . . ."

"We have another person with us," a Tindar said. "I think that everything will be quite all right."

"Well, we shall see. Apologies will be made to your corporation and a settlement of some kind, of course," Dr. Bromley shrugged. "There is extremely little else that we can do. Until one of you disappears, I suggest that you—" he indicated one Tindar—"be Alpha Tindar, and you—" he indicated the other—"be Beta Tindar. It might simplify matters."

The doctor himself checked them out at the desk and followed them to the door full of regret at the event.

ALPHA and Beta Tindar ate a hearty meal at a cafe, then phoned Miss Kanton and felt better seeing her face in the view-plate. It was a nice face, a big solemn, but nice. She had brown eyes and a burn-boney nose of bone. They found that she was already out of the Dope Lab and was waiting for them.

An electric car whisked to the place where Miss Kanton stayed. They found Miss Kanton, but her window and stoopway they did not like. She was a woman technician, a capable intelligent young woman who, the Tindars generously thought, could be an extremely nice person to have around if she would cease playing the part of the scientist for a few minutes. Her smile, her figure, her face all checked perfectly. But her mind was as serious as an adding machine that had been left out in the snow.

She came down the walk towards the car with her daps, each with a beef-cow under one arm. The Tindars glanced simultaneously at her ankles, but found them covered by the leather boots of her space suit.

"This is my daps," Miss Kanton said as she came up to the car, indicating her duplicates who had a white tap to her suit collar.

"Hello, mascot!" greeted the daps of Miss Kanton. "Call me Kay, will you?"

Miss Kanton looked startled and the two Tindars quietly gulped a groaning.

"I'm afraid I have a rather wild replica of myself," Miss Kanton said with surprise. "I'm glad she's only good for empty hours. But she could ruin my reputation in thirty seconds."

"Quit worrying about your reputation," scolded the many daps. "Get those man-made readings out of your mind and think more about those two exciting books of machinery here in the car."

"Katherine!" Miss Kanton shrieked. "I will not tolerate such impudent meddling. Behave yourself!"

"It's just your inner self speaking, sister," the daps replied with a chuckle.

"Katherine!" Miss Kanton gasped. "Mr. Tindar, you will ignore this, please!"

Miss Kanton and her daps climbed into the car and Alpha Tindar pressed a button, sending them pinging quietly down the street towards the rocket port.

"Which if you is the daps?" Miss Kanton asked.

"We don't know," the Tindars answered.

"What?"

Together Alpha and Beta explained the unusual situation. Miss Kanton was shocked by the frank accident, but she smiled. Her daps laughed and quietly sobbed.

"Hello!" she said. "If I knew which was the daps we could have a wonderful empty hour!"

The quarter arrived at Hosing Field a few minutes later and Alpha Tindar went into the Rocket Department's office to check on the ship. He came back and threw his hands up in the air.

"Another differential!" he exclaimed. "No four-wheeler. Just those damned two-centers. We'll have to take two of them."

"Will, get a couple of Armstrong's," Beta said. "They're about the best."

"I'll take a Boieson, myself," Miss Kanton said. "Armstrong's have a shanty when they're a couple of years old."

"The strong-willed woman scientist!" her daps mused. "Armstrongs are the better ships."

"Katherine!" Miss Kanton squeaked. "I'll have you dismasted if you continue that! I shall not tolerate much more!"

"You haven't time, granny," her daps replied blithely.

The field pilots joined the small two-masted ships out onto the field and into the launching cradles. When they were ready and equipped, the pilots signaled the Tindles and the Kanton.

"Now, you and Miss Kanton's daps take one."

Alpha Tindal and "Miss Kanton will drive me in the other. If there is a preliminary disputation of one of us, my one will be last that way."

Beta nodded and Miss Kanton's daps grabbed her hand and ran for one of the ships.

"I honestly believe she's been drinking," Miss Kanton murmured, watching her daphnes laughing as Beta helped her into the ship.

Alpha walked in a slow and stately manner to the other ship and opened the air-lock for the girl.

The ships flashed jet out of their rear tubes and ran swiftly from the girdled cradles. A thunderous roar ran down both spouting into the atmosphere, where the ships veered together and rocketed out of sight towards the board of

transformed asteroids that swung in an orbit around the earth two hundred thousand miles beyond the moon.

Alpha Tindal settled himself deeper into the tight, sponge spring chair by Miss Kanton's side and switched with admiration the magnificent plotting job his "atomic brother" was doing. The other ship was keeping exactly abreast of Miss Kanton, who was setting the pace.

Tindal was falling asleep when Miss Kanton reached on the intership radio. She called the other ship over the phones and all that came in answer were giggles. Miss Kanton quickly replaced the microphones and stared straight ahead on her course with a slightly red face.

TWENTY hours later they were circling Debes preparatory to landing. As was the policy when dropping down upon open land, they switched on the anti-gravity fields, blazed themselves to a dead stop, and sank slowly down upon the furrowed land of the asteroid mass.

The daps thumped down within three hundred feet of one another. Miss Kanton hurriedly snugged on her oxygen helmet, and Alpha followed her through the air-lock, instead of going towards the control tower, which rose from the blue land like a pale yellow candle. Miss Kanton ran to the other ship and pounded on the door until Beta Tindal and the girl-daps opened it and stepped out.

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VICTOR INSTITUTE (PMB 50)

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"What have you been doing, Katherine?" Miss Kannon asked over the helmet radio.

"Telling secrets to each other, guess," the dope bagged. "A nice Tander was a real crook of the work on Beta's face."

Miss Kannon flushed and turned away towards the Control Tower. The other three caught up with her and four abreast they walked lightly over the rough plane. Through the thin atmosphere, and over the behest phones on my hand the crashing drone of the mine in operation. To the Tander it did not sound odd. There was too much noise. The robot-diggers and refiners were supposedly working far below the ground.

Ahead of them, over the clear horizon, sprang a great, lowering metal shape that filled the air with the roar of its engines. It rushed towards them with a flat, matched platform lowered slightly into the ground. The platform was nearly twenty feet in length, with a domed metal glass above it busily sweeping the soil up into the black maw of the storage bin that swelled from it like a monstrous belly.

"It's a digger!" Alpha cried. "Get out of the way!"

In the weak gravity they were able to move by bounds out of the path of the mining machine. It roared past them, sucking up the ground in a death frenzy.

"The digger!" Miss Kannon shouted, screaming above the roar of the Digger.

"De hole!" Beta gasped. "Is his one?"

There was a crashing clank and the ore of crushed metal as the machine gripped the small crater shop up and crushed it in its jaws. The ship vanished into the belching bin that followed the mouth on readily opening wheels. The digger growled over the other horizon, leaving in its wake a shallow, wide furrow.

"I'll get the other ship to safety!" Alpha cried and ran towards it.

"What are the Diggers doing on the surface?" Miss Kannon asked Beta. "They're supposed to be underground."

"Something is all wrong," Beta said. "The Controls are obviously scrambled. Radio guides the diggers, keeps them underground until they're full, then lets them come up to empty."

"Do you think you can fix it?" Miss Kannon's dope asked.

"If it's external trouble, yes," Beta said. "But if it's inside the scale, we'll never be able to get at it. Everything is sealed against tampering. The controls are in tanks. How they ever got scrambled, I can't imagine."

"No wonder there wasn't any radio report," Miss Kannon said. "This place is a madhouse! Look, here comes another one!"

Another Digger appeared on the horizon but it was far to one side, a moving shape against the stars.

"We'd better get into the control tower," Beta said. "It's probably the only safe place on this rock."

They were illuminated momentarily by the blinding jet of the ship as it arced upwards from the uneven ground. As they hurried towards the tower, the ship blasted past them and whistled to a halt near the shore of the tower.

The quarter gathered together near the door and watched with amazement as six more of the huge diggers appeared, grunting and crouching in the soil like enormous pigs. Two crouched together with a terrific clank of metal and their wheels dug up the ground as they hung locked together, whirling thunderously.

The four went into the tower, down the metal corridors to the elevator which took them to the floor with the control boards. Beta passed a combination on the buttons of the door which shot off the room with the control boards. The door whined slowly open.

"The door's warped," Alpha observed.

"There must have been an explosion inside."

They entered the room and at first nothing seemed wrong. The great metal vault in the center of the room seemed intact, the walls were whole. Beta walked around the vault, which rose like a fat column from the metal floor to the ceiling. Alpha came to his side when he heard him exclaim.

"Look at the wall," Beta said.

THERE was a hole the size of a basketball in one side of the wall. The metal about it was cracked, bulging out in a finger around the hole and running down the wall to the floor. Alpha traced the probable trajectory of the missile which had made the hole and found another hole, much smaller, on the face of the vault. The walls of the vault were buckled slightly inward.

The two Tanders aimed from one hole to the other in amazement. The Kannon came to their side.

"No wonder did that!" Miss Kannon's dope said.

"It's hardly possible, unless . . ." Beta pointed. "Power was packed into it, whenever it went!"

"It penetrated three feet of concrete steel at the very least," Alpha said. "Nothing is small as this matter seems to be could have done that."

"Unless . . ." Beta pointed again. "The momentum is what counted. Suppose that the steel was weak, the speed equally terrific?"

Alpha and Beta snapped their fingers at the same instant. "Neutrons!" they said.

"We've found several bits of it already in space," Alpha added. "Terrible mass. That's the only possible reason."

"A piece of neopentium, of high velocity, accelerated by the gravity of Beta, plus opposite velocities. That would have done it," Miss Kannon said.

They were speaking quickly, their heads tilted suddenly toward the wall from the problem with a scientific hunger.

"That's that, then," Alpha sighed as if it had been too easy.

"Wrong," Miss Kanton's dupe whispered. "Look at those meters!"

The other three went to her side. The meters were jumping crazily from maximum to minimum, their needles bent and ruined. Another type was rapidly clicking off numbers on its way down to zero. Miss Kanton tapped it.

"That's the fuel tanks," she said.

"They're draining somewhere!" Alpha said.

"Down, naturally!" the girl-dupe said. "The engine-room covers the whole underground floor! It—"

"If the sparks from the engines reach that fuel—!" Beta cried. He turned to the door and ran down the stairs with the others on his heels.

The elevator dropped them to the lower floor. The corridor was filled knee-deep with a pale, bluish fluid—explosive fuel! It poured like a blue waterfall down the steps leading to the engine. Alpha opened the doors of the elevator and the syrupy liquid flooded in upon him. He waded into it and in the steps where he stumbled to the lower floor. The others were right behind him.

"What about friction—?" Miss Kanton asked, conscious of the novel state of her wet clothing against each other.

"Have to chance it," Beta snapped.

They went into the engine-room, wading carefully through the more fluid. In the main room they saw the fuel slowly creeping up the far legs of the whirling engines towards the network of sparks that could be seen through the ventilator grille.

"Isn't there anyway to shut them off?" Miss Kanton gasped.

Alpha shook his head grimly.

"No. All controls are sealed. Can only be manipulated by Cooperation Engineers," he said.

"Six inches more," Miss Kanton said, looking at the fuel flowing beneath the engine.

"We'd best get out of here fast!" Alpha said. "In ten minutes the Corporation is out one worker."

They were running up the stairs, pushing into the elevator. Beta shoved the door slowly against the pressure of the blue syrup. He shot the car back to the ground level. Here there was no sign of the fuel which was pouring down a mile around a turn in the corridor. They ran down the hall to the door, the Tandans each grasping the arm of a Kanton.

"Wait!" Miss Kanton was crying. "wait! The ship. We've only got one! We can only take two persons back. And you . . . which of you . . ." She stopped, agitated and panting, looking from Alpha to Beta.

The Tandans stifled and panted as the full implication of what she meant hit them.

"Take the ship!" Miss Kanton was sobbing. "Both of you! Go on!"

"Don't be foolish!" Beta snapped. "Get into the ship and get the jets warm. We'll be there in a minute."

"But if you get the wrong one?" Miss Kanton said, trembling.

"The right one will be left back here," Alpha snapped. "Now get into the ship. We've only got a few minutes!"

Miss Kanton turned and ran. She climbed into the two-star and joined the rocket. As the rocket soared out a mass of flames, over the horizon came a Digger, crossing the rail, dashing towards the control tower.

"We both might be able to get into the ship . . ." Beta said.

"No. The seats are roller-made. We'd never even sit in them together," Alpha said. They stood looking at one another, wasting valuable seconds in their conversation. The Digger was leaning larger and larger, coming in a straight line for the control tower.

"Oh, Doyle . . ." Miss Kanton's dupe said, tears in her eyes.

"Shut up!" Alpha snapped. He whirled towards the chamber of the Dorian. It was very near, overwing, slowly moving away from the control with a ponderous gyration.

"Let's go to hell!" Alpha cried, leaping back.

The edge of the huge metal mouth struck the control tower, shattering the entire building and sending an avalanche of concrete down from the facade. Alpha was struck by pieces of the debris as he bounded away from the door of the building. The debris piled into the doorway, smothering it. Beta's head rose over the pile.

"Hang off!" he screamed. "I'll never get past that Digger!"

Alpha ran towards the ship and climbed into it. Crazy thoughts ran through his head as he squirmed himself into the seat. It was a case to case bet. A fifty-fifty chance. Better than none odds he had had. It was a decent gamble, but the stakes . . .

He sealed the door and Miss Kanton sat the rocket up riding up into the clear sky. She drew out of the range of the burning explosion and circled the hole aimed, winning.

INSIDE the control tower, Beta brushed the dust of the wreckage from him and burned down the corridor, pulling the girl dupe by the arm.

"What are you doing? What if you're the real one? Oh, Doyle . . ." she moaned irritably.

Beta went back to the engine-room. He waded through the fuel with the girl dupe behind him.

"We have another bet, just in case," Beta said. "The beam . . ." He pointed at the wall above the burning engine.

The dupe's eyes brightened.

"If only we have time!" she said. "I'll get down. It's dangerous up there. You might be electrocuted. It doesn't matter with regret."

Beta started to protest, then he saw the logic of the girl's suggestion. He nodded quickly, and helped her climb upon the engine. She worked precariously, slipping on the skids of the fuel which was on her feet.

She reached up and seized the handle of her hose, unscrewing it from the engine. Her face was twisted away with effort, her slim body bent in strenuous against the stubborn threads. It loosened and she dropped it down to Beta, who was standing on the rearing blue fuel, waiting.

He snatched it up.

"Get the others, quick!" he shouted, watching with horrified fascination as the fuel crept up to meet the network of sparks.

The girl struggled silently. Beta could hear her quick breathing in his head-phones. The engine whirled, the sparks flashing down towards the explosive fuel.

She dropped another of the hoses to Beta. The third one was free and in his hands when she began working on the fourth. She slipped, the sparks danced up, touching the legs of her suit. The lower part of her suit burst into flame, seared as it was with the fuel. She watched the flames, her face blanched where, as they ate into her suit.

"Katherine!" Beta gasped. This was no duplicate, he thought frantically; this was Katherine, blazing, burning. She would die; he knew that. If she fell back into the fuel, both of them died. He started climbing the engine, reaching for the girl as the huge mass of the hose, her gloved hands frozen to it in a rigid grip.

"No!" she screamed. There was a gas in the water that stopped Beta, brought him back to sanity. He dropped to the floor, watching her . . .

IN the ship that circled the asteroid, there was silence. Alpha sat in the seat by Miss Kannon, a hand gripping his knee, feeling it, waking her in to disappear beneath his fingers, watching his fingers lest they disappear if he looked away.

Miss Kannon was frozen in her seat, against the guide-mechanism until her knuckles were white spots on her hand. She looked straight ahead, refused to look at Alpha.

They circled the asteroid, again and again they rounded it.

"They must have killed the blue," Alpha told hoarsely. "They can't stop it. They must have put it off somewhere."

His words echoed within the ship above the humming of the rockets. Miss Kannon said nothing. Her lips moved slightly, but no sound came.

She turned to speak to Alpha, conquering her emotion, bright tears in her eyes.

The seat beside her was empty, except for a crumpled space suit that slithered to the steel deck before her dilating eyes.

Miss Kannon's hand went to her face. She screamed. It was over, loud cry of utter horror.

IN the engine-room Beta labored. The hoses were sucking at the fuel. The hoses were there usually to suck away the poisonous waste of the engines. Now they were sucking away the fuel with chirpy, slugging sounds, pouring it out onto the rail outside the tower.

The fuel was sucking slowly, drawing away from the sparks in the engines. The girl was nowhere around. Near the fat legs leaving the engines from the floor, the transparent sphere of a spine helmet swelled and rocked with the motion of the fuel. It was the only proof that the girl had ever existed; the sole thing about her that had been real.

Beta watched the hoses and studied the transparent sphere that was floating towards him, drawn by the suction of the wide mouths of the hoses.

"You were a great girl, Katherine," he said. He sighed. He felt weakness pouring inside of him.

The fuel coming down the steps into the engine-room was a mere trickle. The walls above were drained. The level of the fuel was dropping down towards his ankles.

Beta walked carefully through the fuel to the steps. He looked back, watching the hoses. Confident that they could do the job, he mounted the stairs and reached the long corridor to the rubble-strewn doorway. He left wet, oily prints behind him as he walked. He entered the radio communication room.

The disk of the radio glowed warmly before him. He adjusted the frequency to that of the ship of Miss Kannon.

He waited for ten minutes before Miss Kannon's voice came in answer. He told her that everything was all right. She sobbed for a long time. Then she told him that he was the real one. He felt a faint quiver of belated fear that was over-ridden by his weariness.

"You are a great girl, Katherine," he said. "You jump onto the hose, burning, wrapping yourself around it so that you wouldn't fall into the fuel. It's one of the greatest things I've seen. You waited when you were disappearing. You knew that everything was all right then."

The girl on the radio was still sobbing. He told her to hold. He walked out of the room into the corridor and pushed his way through the hole above the rubble pile. He saw that the Diggers were still racing around on the horizon.

The little ship came spurring into sight under full speed. It swerved suddenly within feet of the ground before the anti-gravity field cracked on and lowered it gently. A slim figure bounded out of the ship and came running towards him. He ran to meet it.

He grabbed it up into his arms and stood on the ward plane holding it to him. Together, they walked to the ship and climbed into it. There was a flash, a roar, and the ship shot up into the clear stars.

Moon of Treason

by EMMETT McDOWELL



Branded an outlaw by the ISP, hated and feared as a mutant, Clyde Vickers stalked his quarry in impotent rage. His kind, it seemed, was always wanted for the dirty work . . .

CLYDE VICKERS shuffled reluctantly down the gangplank. After two years on Jupiter he felt buoyant as a toy balloon in the mild gravity of Earth's satellites. Every step he expected to go sailing over the heads of the other passengers—up, up into the vast hazy reaches of Luna City's airlock.

The line passed, came to a furling stop. Vickers found himself wedged between a woman who had boarded the liner at Mars and a bearded Portuguese explorer. He craned his neck, peering over their heads to see what had caused the bottle-neck.

An officer of the ISP, in a blue uniform, was standing at the foot of the gangplank, examining passports. Vickers cowered under his breath.

"Down there," he thought, "down there."

Behind him, the black spaceflier made sudden pistol-like reports as it expanded in the warm sun. It had brought some of the cold of outer space along with it, and host frost stood out on its sides a foot thick. It was rapidly exchanging the heat in the airlock. Vickers shivered as the cold streak through his ill-fitting gray suit.

"Paper," the ISP man said and held out his hand.

With a start Vickers realized that he had reached the end of the gangplank. The ISP man took one look at Vickers' little green back and his face hardened.

"Pardon!" he said.

There were whippers from the crowd. A little boy said: "What's he done, mamma? What's he done?"

"Hush!" she bade him.

Vickers gave no sign that he'd heard.

"Two-time loser, eh?" the ISP man went on and ran his eyes over Vickers. He saw a tall man with hard shoulders, the muscles bulging the cheap gray cloth—muscles that could be acquired only in the hellish gravity of Jupiter's prison cages. Then he saw Vicker's eyes, and he looked startled.

Vickers had his stiffening lips lowered; his eyes seemed almost normal. Almost but not quite!

"What the devil!" the ISP man wet his lips. "Vickers! By God, I should have recognized the name. Vickers, eh?" He seemed about to say more, then changed his mind. "Move along. You're holding up the line."

"My passport."

"Pick it up at the panic board. If you don't report there in twenty-four hours, you'll be picked up yourself and shipped back to Jupiter. You're a two-time loser, Vickers, you can't afford to get into trouble again."

Vickers regarded him with open dislike, then turned on his heel, started across the spaceport at a cautious shuffle.

President!

He couldn't leave the moon. He had to accept whatever work the panic board assigned for him—more than likely some stinking job deep in the moon pits. He must report for a check-up and a psychotherapeutic treatment every four weeks. He couldn't carry or hold property or change jobs.



And if he fell from grace again, it meant exile—a and a life sentence on Jupiter.

Proctor. What the hell had he to look forward to?

ALl his life Vickers had been lonely. His parents, horrified at having produced a monstrosity, had placed him in a house and watched their hands of him.

Not that Vickers' abnormality was disfiguring or particularly noticeable even—you had to look closely at his eyes to perceive the maddening life—but he was a freak, a mutant, and the sight of him had been a constant reminder of their shame.

At the home, Vickers' playmates had quickly discovered his apertures and had treated him about it with the cruelty of children. His apertures at friendship were not weak shafts. He might have been able to adjust but he was never allowed to forget that he was different.

Later when the peculiar power of his eyes became known, he was feared a leech, reviled and cordially hated. Vickers was forced on himself. He took a shell, a hard flapping armor against the senseless compassion he met everywhere.

In spite of hysterical productions and a flood of stories in the mass-media magazines, the Atomic Age had not ushered in a wave of mutants—at least not radical mutants. Vickers was practically unique.

And alone.

Nevertheless Vickers experienced an odd drifting sentiment as he emerged from the lock and Luce Cary. Beneath his thick layers of protective indifference, he was eager as a boy, friendly, sensitive. A stunted prepubescence looked out of his eyes in unguarded moments.

He stood with his back to the wall of an upper floor, breathing deeply of the warm, artificially earth-scented air. Through the coils of his fur he could feel the pavement vibrating faintly, as deep inside the bowels of the moon the mechanized mining worms gnawed out the ore, chewed it, digested it, spat it out as metal ingots.

The voice of the city rolled over him, deafened him. His eyes were bewildered at the crowds jamming the pavement. His pulse leaped. He was like a blind man who has just had his sight restored.

Someone said: "Hello, Vickers," and struck him on the shoulder. "Glad to see you out."

Vickers brought his eyes down. He stared at the man who had addressed him. The look of exclusion slowly faded from his face to be replaced by a puzzled frown.

"I don't know you."

"Oh, come now, surely you recognize me." The man was as big as Vickers, exactly, and the

same build. He was clad in a shabby gray suit. There was something disturbingly familiar about him. Vickers wrinkled his forehead in concentration.

"I must remember that," said the man, and wrinkled his forehead exactly like Vickers.

They were standing in a doorway out of the stream of pedestrians. Suddenly Vickers' mouth fell open. He stared at the man in startled disbelief.

It was himself!

The resemblance was too perfect. The same close-cropped black hair and Jupiter-endowed moustache. The same short, straight nose, wide, dim-tipped mouth, square jaw. Even the same transparent inner lids lowered over pale gray eyes. It was like looking into a mirror.

Vickers felt his mouth go dry.

"Who are you?" he demanded harshly.

"You remember me? Good."

The man grinned, began to edge away.

Vickers lunged for him. But the fellow shook his grasp, slipped into the stream of traffic like an eel. He was rapidly being swallowed up by the crowd. Vickers ploughed after him.

There was something about—something dangerous to himself, he felt. He was determined not to lose sight of his double and opened his misty-lidded lids . . .

Instantly, the scene about the busy airport changed. It took on a vaporous unreality like an X-ray photograph. The people, the buildings, even the pavement underfoot became transient as smoke. He could see right through them.

It always frightened Vickers a little to use his full vision, taking him a second to adjust. Then he focused his double about ten steps ahead.

He could make out the misty outlines of chambers in the man's flaking flesh. So that was how he'd given himself the necessary berth. Pale flid on his inner reproducing Vickers' Jupiter-trained muscles. The contracting lids had been cleverly stretched by contact lenses.

But why?

Why should anyone go to all that trouble to disguise himself exactly like Vickers—even to the id-firing guy and? There was something sinister about the whole affair.

Just then Vickers tripped, lost his precarious balance and fell sprawling.

He scrambled to his feet in time to see the stranger leap into an air-taxi.

"Look at his eyes!" a woman cried out at his elbow. "Look at his eyes!"

VICKERS hastily lowered his inner lids, crouched under his breath. There wasn't another job in sight. He'd better clear out before he was the focal point of a riot. Normal humans weren't fond of mutants.

Already a crowd was collecting. Vickers heard angry mutterings. He forced his way through the press ball-bike. Suddenly he found his path blocked by two disconcerted-looking men.

"Hold on," and the man on the outside wedged his hand on Vickers' chest. He was blond with cold, pale blue eyes. "What's your hurry?"

Vickers started to thrust them aside when he felt the second man jam a gun into his ribs.

"Vickers, arrest you?" asked the blond man.

"What of it?"

"Come along." He jerked his chin toward an air taxi. "Don't make a fuss."

"Where?"

"Headquarters." The man produced an ISP card. "We used to catch you at the shop, but you'd left."

Vickers hesitated. Despite the pistol in his ribs, he thought he could take the two plainclothesmen. It would be a fairly move, though. The ISP would throw out the net for him, and this time he would be sent back to Jupiter for life.

He sighed, "All right," and climbed into the cab.

He wondered if there could be any connection between the incident outside the space-port and this visit to ISP headquarters, but he knew it would be useless to ask. He stared absently out the cab window at the polygonal crowd, drawn from three worlds.

The moon was international. It was governed by a board of seven delegates, one each from the seven great nations of Earth. They were known simply as "The Seven" with headquarters in the moon-tower near the center of Luna City. The ISP offices were located there too as well as all government bureaus.

All at once Vickers realized that the cab was headed in the wrong direction.

"Where are we going?" he demanded, jared out of his stolid calm.

The ISP agents had taken seats one on each side of him. He could feel their guns prodding his ribs, sleek satisfaction with ball-on stomachs. Wild things that could tear half his gun out.

"Slow up," the blond man said.

Vickers leaped into silence again. He was more bewildered and angry than alarmed. Try as he would, he couldn't guess what'd went him badly enough to snatch him.

There had been no trials in Vickers' line of work. Szumach and Kibbie, his partners, had both been killed in the ISP trap five years ago. There was no one left who had any interest in him. Unless—

He said suddenly. "You're not ISP agents."

"That's right."

"What's the idea then?"

"You ask too many questions," and the blond man.

"As" that's a fact," the other agreed.

Vickers' mouth set. He still thought he could take the two gunmen, but his curiosity had the best of him. He sank back in the cushions and waited.

The cab had gone about three kilometers when it pulled up at the curb.

"All right," Vickers," the blond man took. "here's where you get your answers."

He crawled out, unalighted. The cab had stopped before a door of opaque blue plastic. Above it a lens of electric blue light was the megaphone.

INTERNATIONAL SPY RING

INCORPORATED

Secretly Bought and Sold

Vickers stared at it in disbelief. There was not the plain blank door expected between a theatre on the right and a mural agency with posters of the Martian desert in its windows on the left. The blue door was hard to focus on—like a slightly blurred picture. He opened his screaming lids.

To his utter bewilderment, he found himself looking through the door into the theatre lobby. The blue door didn't lead anywhere. It wasn't even a door, he realized, but an illusion!

VICKERS had been examined many times.

"The peculiarity of your vision," one eminent psycho-lookologist had told him, "lies in your ability to see mirror as it actually is. Thousands considered energy. There's some space between the nucleus of an atom and its electrons in proportion then between the man and an planet. It's like looking at the stars"—and he had waved his hand at the sky—"you can see them but they don't obstruct your vision."

It was a strange world that Vickers could see with the screaming lid raised—a busy-like substantial world, beautiful and shocking. A glass world without secrets.

But his eyes never led to him. And the door didn't exist in fact. There was only a blank mirror wall where he had seen it.

Then the blond man stepped forward and went through the motions of opening the door.

"Inside," he said and walked through and vanished!

Vickers knew he had vanished, because he could still see the empty outlines of the wall where the door should have been and the interior of the theatre. He felt his stomach go hollow. "In you go," the other man said and nudged him with the pistol.

Vickers allowed his inhibiting life to drop.

At once he could see the door again, standing open, and a reception room beyond. The blood race was just made rooming for him to enter.

Vickers drew a deep breath and stepped across the threshold.

There was a moment of abysmal darkness, a giddy sensation, then Vickers found himself standing in the reception room, wide deep in carpet. He felt unconqueringly heavier—not so much as he would weigh on Earth but more than he should weigh on the moon.

A girl was approaching him. She said: "Go right in, Mr. Vickers," indicating a door across the room; "they're waiting for you."

"Who's waiting for me?"

"Mr. Thorpe. The president of International Spy Ring, Inc. Right in here, sir."

The newly opened side of the company struck him again. The seven great nations would no more permit such a business to exist than they would let rapidly by and allow an armed invasion.

In the first place they all maintained their own very efficient espionage and counter-espionage systems. They couldn't afford to let one nation grow more powerful than the rest. At any rate they had to preserve the status quo.

He didn't voice his doubts, but followed the receptionist into a large, sparsely furnished office. There were no windows, the room being lit by soft yellow light that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. The top of a huge desk of purely functional design was littered with papers, and behind it sat a bald, pink-faced man, wearing a pleasant expression.

There was one other person in the room—a girl—and she was crying softly.

"Mr. Thorpe," the receptionist said, "Mr. Vickers is not you," and withdrew.

The girl turned her back quickly as Vickers so that he couldn't see her face, but he could watch her hands worrying the material of her dress.

It was an expensive dress, Vickers recognized, an exclusive Venetian creation of green pouter that was very neatly unimportant even to his normal vision. He was a little shocked and looked away.

The man called Thorpe bowed at him. "Glad to see you, Vickers," he said and made a round gesture. "Won't you sit down?"

Vickers let himself sink into a chair across from the girl. He couldn't keep from studying her. Her brown hair was done in a sort of halo effect and she wore wedge-type sunglasses that must have added three inches to her height and made her feet look tiny.

Thorpe cleared his throat.

"We had a good reason for bringing you here," he said. "I hope it didn't inconvenience you too much."

"Get to the point," said Vickers.

Thorpe looked startled.

"Vickers, we can use a man with your unique talents. In fact, there's a job that no one but you—"

"Hurry."

Vickers was on his feet, waiting for the door to the reception room.

"Don't be hasty," Thorpe said in an apologetic voice. "I really can't let you go until you hear me out."

VICKERS caught the veiled threat in his words, swung around. Thorpe's finger was resting on a button. The girl had begun to sniff softly.

"All right," said Vickers, "but make it short. I have to register at the Peace Board office before the expiration of twenty-four hours."

"No hurry," Thorpe said, waving him back to his chair. "You met your double on the street. He's gone to the board to register in your place. He'll also fill any job they see fit to assign you. So you see, Vickers, you're quite free. You're even supplied with a perfect alibi."

Vickers did not see. He saw a number of things, none of which reassured him. He said: "Finger-prints?"

"They'll check. He's wearing tips with your prints. So will his height and weight. He's a fine actor, Vickers, one of the best."

"How did you get my prints? My record is in the ISF secret file, isn't it?"

"But that's our business Secret, Vickers. Any secret. State secrets, scientific secrets." He chuckled. "We make no secret about it."

Vickers looked skeptical.

"You seem to tell me that you could read the plans, say, of the USSR's new space drive."

Thorpe rubbed his hands together, his girls broadcasting.

"We sold them the plans. In fact, we sold them some plans to the Black Republic, the Arab Federation, China, and New Spain as well. The only reason we didn't sell them to the United States is because they happened to be the ones who had developed them."

He paused to let his words sink in. "There may seem unethical, but it's our policy. In one small way, we feel that we help to preserve the status quo."

"Rubbish!" said Vickers. "If you'd done that, they would have sent the lot to you off to Jeddah."

"They say," Thorpe looked at his watch. "In fact, Vickers, we have information that the ISF plans to send us an exactly twenty-three minutes."

Vickers affirmed. "Is that accepted?"

"Quite. But don't alarm yourself. They'll never get past the blue door."

Far from being anything, Thorpe's reassurance had just the opposite effect on Vickers. For the first time, he began to doubt that he could get through that blue door himself. There was something so damned complacent about the man behind the desk—

In sudden alarm, Vickers opened his slithering lid, flicked a quick glance around.

The room was quite real, but there was no sign of Luna City set of the moon's desolate surface. He sucked in his breath.

The office seemed to be part of a large windowless structure. He could see, through the walls, a random scene: sea curmudgeons and a red pebble beach. Strange, sinuous vegetation cloaked the shore.

"Where are we?" he blurted out. "How did I get here?"

"The sorry," said Thorpe, "but that's one secret that won't be told."

Vickers closed the slithering lid and the office recovered its solidity.

"What's your proposition?"

Thorpe gave him a shrewd look. "This is Tami Frick," he introduced the girl. "I'm sure you've heard of her father. He's the physicist . . ."

VICKERS sat bolt upright. Frick was probably the most renowned man on Earth, Moon, or Venus. His company was the Systems greatest physicist. Frick was head of the "United States" Bureau of Research. It was practically treason for his daughter to be in the office of such an organization as "International Spy Ring, Inc."

Thorpe said. Tami's father has been abducted by the Arab Federation."

The girl gave a muffled sob, buried her face in her hands.

Vickers yelled: "What!" Then in a lower voice, "But there's been nothing on the news-cams."

"Of course not. The U.S. is looking it up. They don't want it broadcast that their top experimental physicist has been stolen. They don't even know who has him or where he is. Tami has asked us to get her father back."

"Where is he?"

Thorpe didn't look so cheerful as he drummed on the desk top.

"Here, Luna City. He's being held in the embassy of the Arab Federation."

Vickers said: "Why don't you turn your information over to the U.S.?"

"It's not as simple as that. The Arabs would kill him before they'd give him up."

Vickers shrugged. "If the U.S. with all its resources can't release him, I don't see how you expect me to do it."

"You can, though. In fact you're the only one who can. The question is, will you?"

"Not!" said Vickers flatly. "I won't."

"But—"

"No buts about it. With my record, it would be poison for me, if my name ever became associated with anything like International Spy Ring, Inc. I've thought, Thorpe, I've quit. I can't afford to be sent back to Jupiter."

Tami Frick suddenly burst into a flood of tears. Vickers clamped his fist. At that instant a bell began to ring nervously.

"The red," Thorpe said. "What say we watch it? Anyway, Vickers, you can't leave 'til it's over."

Vickers grunted, sank deeper into his chair. Tami's soft child-like crying was going under his skin, but he steered himself against it.

Thorpe pressed a button on his desk, and a large television screen on the wall behind him glowed into life. The multiple voices of Luna City rolled into the office statement: three isolation. The tri-dimensional effect was so real, that it was as if the wall itself had been removed and they were peering directly into the street outside the blue door. Vickers could read its idiotic sign.

INTERNATIONAL SPY RING

INCORPORATED

Secrecy Bought and Sold

All at once he forward as he discovered the silent men converging on the entrance. They were dressed in civilian clothes, threading their way unobtrusively through the press. ISF men, Vickers recognized, with a chill of alarm.

One of them reached the portal, put out his hand for the knob.

The blue door vanished.

It simply went out like a light, leaving the ISF men staring stupidly at the blank wall of the theatre.

Thorpe snugged off the television. Vickers could see that he was shaking.

"The fun's over," he said. "But they'll be moving around there for a week. There's really no door there, you know."

"Yes, I know. But I'll be damned if I understand."

"You will," Thorpe said cryptically. Then he

Self pity! He'd hammer wrench himself. That way led to nervous, minor depression, and insanity.

He wished Toni would go away and leave him alone. He worked better alone. But he knew she'd been set to watch him. The Ring probably thought she'd do a better job of it since it was so far outside to see that he didn't double-cross them.

She said, "Clyde."

"Yes?" He was startled and dropped his stitching idle. She'd never called him by his first name before.

"You mean being forced into this job, don't you? I'm sorry. Honest, I am, Clyde. But it was father's life or—or . . ."

"Or mine," he supplied dryly.

"That isn't his."

"Isn't it?"

"No. You'll be protected and advised—"

He said: "How much do you know about International Spy Ring, Inc.?"

She looked startled, her eyes widening. "Not— not very much, I guess. I've heard father speak of them. They're big, Clyde. You don't know how big. They've offices on Earth and Mars and Venus, too. The ISF can't do a thing. They can't get past the blue doors. You can't fight the Ring. They're invulnerable."

"Nothing's invulnerable."

"Clyde!" Her hand started towards him, dropped.

She can't bring herself to touch me, he thought. They're friendly now—because I'm necessary; they can't do without my help. But what about afterwards? What then?

If we were lucky, he'd be set free, to work in the moon pits where his double was now. If he were lucky! He shivered a little. He knew too much about International Spy Ring, Inc. As soon as he was of no more use to them, they'd dispose of him. Permanently. Probably in that dimension where their office was located. That beautiful blue world with the atmosphere of silence.

"Clyde," Toni repeated. "What are you going to do? You're not planning to double-cross the Ring, are you? Not that, Clyde?"

"No." But he filed the idea away. The ISF might be willing to forget his record, let him start out with a clean slate if he could deliver the Ring into their hands.

"Why did the Asks kidnap your father?" he asked Toni suddenly.

THE old husband. He—he was working on telepathy. And somehow they got wind of it. It would have made space ships outlandish. Asks could be transported instantly behind enemy lines. It would have made the United

States supreme. He was about to succeed." She shook her head. "But I don't see how the Asks learned about it."

"Don't you?"

"No." She looked puzzled, then her brown eyes widened in comprehension. "The Ring! But they're helping to rescue him."

"Why not? They're getting paid by both sides. You heard Thorpe claim that they'd sold the space drive to every one of the seven countries."

"No. I can't believe it, Clyde." She let her lip. "They're not like that. Not really."

"Rubbish."

The wife's face had grown very white. "You won't let me down, Clyde. You'll get father out, wherever you do."

He opened his recruiting file, peered through the wall into the hallway. There were two women in the waiting pool. The sleeping chamber was empty. So was the hallway.

He said, "Yes." Then, "Check the radio. This is it."

He heard her gasp. Then she began to talk hurriedly into a tiny radio strapped about her wrist.

Walters looked up and down through the various floors of the embassy suite door, checking the position of the guard details, the officials and their families. It was going to be tricky, he saw, a matter of split-second timing.

He got up and examined the clock air seal. It was a transparent plastic air drop and filled a fourth of the room.

One outer wall of the room had been removed outright. It had been sandwiched with cloth like the strip props so that it looked solid enough from the outside. But when the time arrived, the air seal could burst right through it into the street.

The Ring was thorough, Walters had to admit. And ruthlessly efficient.

He said: "On in the van and start the motor. Tell them we'll crack out of here in exactly fifteen minutes."

He heard her catch her breath and wheeled on her suddenly.

"What's wrong?" he demanded sharply. "Good Lord, don't go into a funk now!"

"Hold it!" she said, the radio to her ear. He saw the blood drain out of her face as she listened. Then she clicked it off, turned frightened eyes on him.

"It's your double." Her voice sounded like lead. "The ISF has discovered the substation. They have the net out for you now. You couldn't get a break without being caught."

Walters could feel his stomach knot with shock. He stared at her, his blazing eyes probing straight

through her. Anywhere else in the system, he might have been able to escape.

But Luna Clay! It was like a homoeopically scaled gold-fish bowl with the ISP blocking all the exits. Sooner or later they'd dig him out.

Scientification and a life sentence to the Jupiter Penal Mines! There was no leniency shown third offenders, no matter how minor the infraction.

He got a grip on himself with an effort.

"Tell them," he said to the girl, "we'll crack out of here according to schedule."

Her mouth made a soundless O.

"Get in the tank and start the motor," he said with a gleam sparkle of humor. "I might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb!"

"But how'll we slip through the ISP net?" Tim protested.

"Get in there," Vickers said in a voice that brooked no questions. He swung back to the wall separating them from the Arabian embassy. The adjoining bedroom, he saw, was still empty.

HE drew the stonic knife from its holster beneath his barroom, pressed the stud. A long blade of concentrating stonic energy shot from the handle.

The blade went into the wall as if the tough plastic had been butter. With infinite caution, Vickers cut a four-foot window into the next building, lifted out the block.

"Don't fumble your part," he said over his shoulder. "We may be in a hurry when we come back this way."

Without waiting for a reply, he stepped through, fixed the block back into place.

His last glimpse of Tim revealed her crouched in the transparent plastic air tank, her eyes round and frightened as two new moons.

VICKERS didn't hurry. Hope for success lay in two factors: audacity and his peculiar vision which allowed him to see what his opponents were doing and so keep a number of jumps ahead.

The Arabs were a mixture of the old and new. Scientifically, they were on a par with any of the seven great nations, but they clung with superstitious fanaticism to the old customs, the old way of life.

The haven was still unvisited, and Vickers knew it was would be a guard outside his door.

He looked back through several walls that acted like layers of cheesecloth to his eyes, discerning the guard's figure but not obscuring it. He found the women. There were four, and half a dozen servants besides. But they were concentrated in the pool and in two of the rooms.

He could watch them laughing and chatting or swimming in the lapped water. Dark-eyed

beauties with slender waists and full hips and breasts. It was like a silent film of the seductress. But infinitely more real.

And deadly.

There was no one in the hall. Satisfied, Vickers left the bedroom, walked swiftly down the carpeted hall until he reached the door at the end.

He could see the barren guard leaning against the wall, a heavily bearded figure with a hawk nose and a hawk's fierce eyes. An automaton was belted outside his blue and white striped barroom.

Without hesitation or pause, Vickers ran the stonic knife through the lock, forced open the door.

The guard spun around, staggered in surprise. He caught sight of Vickers, searched for the automaton.

"By Allah!" he began.

Vickers cut off his head.

The head hit the floor with a thump, rolled a little, came to rest on its stump, staring at Vickers out of open, startled eyes.

It upset Vickers, made him a little sick at his stomach. He swallowed, glanced about quickly.

Three men, he discerned, were approaching around a bend in the corridor. He had perhaps a minute or a minute and a half before they came into sight.

He stuffed the guard's body into a closet, threw the head in after it. He covered the blood-stains with a carpet, welded shut the barren door with dot up of the stonic knife. Then he ran up the corridor away from the approaching men.

This whole wing must be the living quarters of the embassy staff. It was proportionately grand like the upper floors of a hotel. He could see a few people in their rooms, one or two in the corridors, which he avoided automatically.

The cell block where Fredch was being held was located in the main building. The traffic was considerably heavier there, and Vickers' eyes were never still. They darted here, there, watching one person's progress, judging how many seconds it would take another to reach a certain intersection.

His ears were alerted for the first outbreak of the alarm bell. He didn't have time to notice the antique hangings, the esoteric decorations, though he did catch an impression of sumptuousness.

The rear of Fredch's cell barred against the back of an officer. In advance Vickers had disappeared to cut through the wall between office and cell and so avoid killing the guard. If he was lucky, he would avoid detection for precious minutes also.

He had almost reached his objective when a heavy-set bearded official covered the office and ran down behind the desk.

Vickens could see him miserably as he sat to work with some papers. He wrote furiously under his breath, but didn't pause. Throwing open the door, he jumped into the chamber.

In the Arctic gravity of the moon, Vickens' leap carried him across the room to the top of the Arab's desk.

The official gasped, tried to rise and fell wet. His face was turned up to Vickens—a long frightened face with skin like yellow leather.

Vickens looked him on his pointed chin.

The Arab went over backwards with a crash. Vickens didn't glance at him, but shot the door, smashed the far wall with the same knife.

He lifted out a four-foot segment. Fredrick was on the other side sitting at the opening like a startled cat.

"What—" he began, catching sight of Vickens.

Vickens said low voiced: "Start up. Come on!" Holding out his hand, he half-helped half-yanked the physicist from the coil.

"Who are you?" Fredrick's clothes were wrinkled and he needed a shave. He was gruff, pale, excited. "I know! You're Vickens!"

Vickens' eyes narrowed in surprise, but he only said: "Harry!"

The passage outside was still deserted, thank the gods. He pulled the physicist after him, sprinted toward the living quarters in the wing.

There were voices ahead. Two men going in the same direction they were, Vickens saw. He slowed down in order not to trample their heels.

He was nervous now. He could feel the skin creeping through his fingers.

Still no alarm! They burst out of the corridor into an enormous hall, crossed it swiftly, ducked down another passage. Down place was a rat run. Fredrick was panting: "Hold on, old man!" Vickens thought: "Hold on!" Still no alarm. They were going to make it. They had to—

All the bells in the world seemed to cut loose at once!

VICKENS jumped as if he'd been shot. Fredrick clattered his chest. For a moment Vickens was afraid the quartermaster would pass on.

The bell rang frantically.

Hundreds of bells! Everywhere. Bells and drums and trumpeting feet. Through the noisy walls Vickens could see running soldiers, frightened civilians, women and children. A vast terrifying pandemonium like a disturbed ant nest—like a glass ant colony kept for observation.

Then the doors began to wheeze shut. Automatic doors closing off the passages. Blocking escape! One remained shut just behind them.

A party of guards caught sight of them. Steel-jacketed bullets coughed and whined down the corridor.

Vickens threw a gas grenade. The guards were blasted out by a fountain of pale green mist. It wasn't deadly, but it would knock out the Arabs, close off the passage temporarily.

Fredrick was sobbing for breath. Suddenly Vickens grabbed him by the shoulder.

"Hush! This way! Through the hatch!"

With the same knife he freed the door which he'd sealed a few minutes before. A few minutes! He glanced at his watch. Eighteen minutes exactly, it seemed like hours! He was over his time. He pape his shoulders to the door, dove at back with a crash.

There was a cluster of frightened women in the corridor. When they saw Vickens and Fredrick, they began to scream and fled screaming like dolphins from a hawk.

Vickens paid not attention to them, but rushed to the bedrooms where he had cut through the wall. Kicking out the segment he almost buried Fredrick through the opening.

Tom was waiting in the air taxi with the door open. A white, startled Tom with a face like a mask.

"Dad!" she cried.

Fredrick tumbled into the taxi. Vickens started to shut the door, but Tom held it open.

"Get in," she begged in a tight voice. "Quick!"

"No," he said. "The ISP would spot me in that air taxi and stop us. You can get through all right by yourselves."

Conservationist mimed itself on Tom's warning. She shook her head. "We're not going without you."

"Yes, you are!" he said, "no time to explain. I'll meet you at the blue door."

She was almost to turn. "Glyde, we're not going to leave you behind!"

Through the riping hole in the wall behind them, Vickens could hear the sounds of pursuit closing in, but he didn't look around.

"You kids fool!" he said brutally. "We you want to see me killed? Do what I say. This is my kind of work!"

Suddenly she leaped from the air taxi, kissed him hard on the mouth. Her eyes were wet.

"I'll be waiting," she said, catching her breath. "you crazy Quinceo idiot. I'll wait forever."

Then she slammed the door. The taxi roared, half-forward, and leaped forward, burrowing a hole in the fiber wall.

Vickens aimed after the disappearing air cab, pinched his mouth with the back of his hand.

"To be damned," he said softly. "To be damned." Then he turned around.

He was just in time to see the first of the Arab guards lunge through the hole in the wall of the hallway.

Vickers heard the other gas grenade. The egg-shaped glass bomb cracked against the floor. Flashes of the pale green paralytic gas shot upward. But Vickers didn't wait to see its effect.

He left through the hole torn by the gas man, reached the perimeter, began to walk rapidly toward the corner, the small-brown hussars stopping about his sides.

He had seconds only before the pursuit would develop again. The bomb was a delaying action no more.

UP ahead he could see a road block, and policemen milling around in the street. A car hung from the level above, blocking the air traffic. The ISF was on the job.

"Out of the frying-pan into the fire," he thought grimly. He glanced back toward the house, although the Arabs couldn't possibly come through the roof, until they'd procured a gas and blow the front door.

An ISF patrol boat was gliding slowly up the street behind him. It was manned by two men and was traveling just above the surface traffic. A shadow, heavily-armed and armored craft, it reminded Vickers of a scout ship as it floated lazily through the air.

He jumped to the edge of the perimeter, waved the patrol boat down frantically.

It gave a low roar as it swam, swung in to the curb. The door opened.

The two men inside were uniformed—short blue breeches and bloomers trimmed in gold with the ISF insignia—three star-shaped medals representing Earth, Venus and Mars—emblazoned on their shoulders. They were both young and clean-cut. Only their eyes looked old and hard.

"What's the trouble?" the officer nearest Vickers asked shortly.

"I saw him!" Vickers shouted excited. I saw him!"

"Saw what?"

"The suspect!"

The ISF agents exchanged glances. As they swung Vickers hit the curb on the outside as the sample. He lay low with the handle of the atom bomb. The men stopped forward, bumped him: "against the shimmer windshield. Vickers was a body sliding in beside him.

He shoved the unconscious agent to the floor board, pressed the end on the knife handle. The blade of sparking flame glinted into life.

"Take us up!" he said to the startled man at the controls; "and don't touch the radio!"

Almost as an afterthought he added softly: "I'm Vickers. I'd just as soon die now, all at once, as be sent back to the Jupiter Mines to die by degrees."

The ISF man blanched. He lifted the patrol boat into the air, sent it scooting down the street. He kept dropping his eyes to the shimmering blade of flame.

"Don't get that thing too close," he pleaded hoarsely.

Vickers said: "Broad Water Street, level 3. And I won't get the blade too close if we get through without trouble."

"But suppose I've ordered it?"

"That's your tough luck."

The ISF man was sweating. But he didn't dare remove his hands from the controls. Headlines of panic-stricken rolled down his cheeks and then unrolled.

As they approached the roadblock, he touched the alarm. At the same word, a man leaped up the net, and the patrol boat slid beneath it.

Vickers let his breath escape. He was sweating, too, he noticed. His forehead felt clammy as a dead fish.

They reached the blue door without being bothered, though. Vickers stared at the sign:

INTERNATIONAL SPY RING, INCORPORATED

Secrets Bought and Sold

It was the one place in Laramie City where the ISF couldn't reach him. But would the ring give him sanctuary? He didn't know.

"They will," he thought; "they will, by Heaven, or take the consequences!"

He said: "That's where I leave you, office. Thanks for the lift," and slid out of the patrol boat.

The ISF man had guns. Vickers had taken his automatic, but the agent reached for the emergency pump in the locker. Before he could shoot, though, Vickers had disappeared through the blue door.

He sprang from the patrol boat, started after him. He was three feet from the blue door when it vanished.

INside the reception room Vickers balanced on the balls of his feet, the ISF agent's automatic in his hand. His mouth was a thin line. Except for Vickers, the room was empty.

He was about to raise his screaming fist when the door of the inner office opened and Tom flew to meet him. Instantly, he jerked up the automatic, but the girl didn't even notice it.

"Clayd!" she said, and threw her arms about

him, clinging desperately as if she were afraid to turn loose "I've been so afraid." There was a funny little catch in her voice.

Vickens stared down at her, refusing to believe his senses. Then she tilted her head back, and he could see the relief and happiness shining in her eyes—and something broader.

Vickens kissed her. All his doubts were suddenly swept away and somehow the old hurts along with them.

"Mr. Vickens," the receptionist said.

He hadn't noticed her enter the room. But he looked up and she was smiling too. There was no recognition in her eyes.

He said: "Yes."

"They're waiting to see you, Mr. Vickens. If you'll just step this way."

He glanced questioningly at Tami, who nodded. Together they entered Thorpe's office.

Frederick was there, looking old and tired and a little mean. He was sitting behind his big desk with Thorpe at his elbow. There were two others in the office, a tall, parchment-faced Chinese, obviously of Mandarin descent, and an Arab with the features of a Biblical patriarch. They were smiling, all except Thorpe, who couldn't very well with his jaw in a cast.

Doctor Frederick put the palms of his hands on the desk and leaned forward. He said, "I'm very glad you made it, Vickens. I haven't had a chance to express my appreciation."

Vickens wrinkled his forehead. There was an air of helpful friendliness tinged with awe in their attitude that puzzled him. He didn't say anything.

Frederick looked vaguely embarrassed. "I—we've another favor to ask you, Vickens. We want you to come in with us."

"What?" said Vickens in a strained voice.

"We want you in International Spy Ring, Inc. Good you. We—well, we wouldn't expect you to accept a senior position of course. Not a spot of your culture. If you'll join us, Vickens, you can take charge of the field work. None of us is so well fitted for active duty as you with your remarkable voice, your reasonableness."

Vickens didn't know what to say. That anybody would want him, wanted him around, considered him so smart, knocked a hole in his armor. He had no defenses against friendship.

"But you," he said. "Doctor Frederick, you're head of the U. S. Bureau of Research—"

"I'm also the head of International Spy Ring, Inc."

At Vickens's expression, Frederick showed a smile in the corner his visage.

"Don't judge us too harshly. Science is international, not the property of one individual or one nation, even. It must belong to everybody.

"We don't want power. We're after peace and tolerance and the dissemination of knowledge. We're united, Vickens. The scientists, the technicians, the engineers of the seven great nations. Not all of us, but enough of us."

He gave Vickens a shrewd penetrating look. "Our way may not seem ethical, but it works. When there are no secrets between countries, who is almost impossible. And there are no secrets any more, we see to that."

"If the Arab Federation discovers a new gas, we sell the formula to each of the other countries. If the Black Republic or China starts a program of military training or lays the keel of a new battleship, in a week everyone of the other countries has the complete details."

"We don't sell the information for profit, Vickens, but to finance the organization."

VICKENS was stunned. The realization that the Ring was not a hand grasping organization of thieves, spies, and traitors; but an international group comprising the finest minds and bent on preserving the peace, left him completely bewildered.

"I don't know what to say," he said. "Of course I'll join you."

"Good." Frederick jumped up, came around the desk with his hand out. "We'll get you a pardon. It wouldn't do for any man-in-law to be a fugitive from the IRS." He walked to the cabinet who had crowded about Vickens, pumping his hand.

It occurred to Vickens that these men were pleased to have him—not in spite of his sentence, but because of it. They'd even been a little afraid he might turn them down.

It was a new experience for him, a good experience. He had the sudden conviction that at last he'd found his place in the world. It made him feel warm.

The Chinese was saying: "You're a violent man, Vickens, a dangerous man. We were afraid that you might not see eye to eye with us in our aims."

"No," Vickens protested, really shocked. "No, I'm not a violent man. I do what I must and do it as quickly and effectively as I can. But I'm not violent."

Thorpe's eyes twinkled. Seizing a pencil he wrote something, held it up for them all to see, at the same time tapping the rest on his jaw.

Vickens couldn't express his grin. Tami squeezed his hand.

Thorpe had written: "The gods help us all, if he ever does get violent!"

UNWELCOME TENANT



By
**ROGER
DEE**

The first Earthman to hit deep space discovered what was so terribly wrong with the world he had left behind. Why couldn't he turn back?

It happened just before he reached the zero point, the no-man's land in space where the unmeasured gravity fields of two planets meet and cancel out.

Maynard was dividing his attention evenly between the transparent bubble that housed the Venus population and the two ports, forward and aft, that broke the steel paneling of the control vehicle. He listened critically to the measured clicking of the Gagarin counters and the queer silence of the air purifiers, and in spite of his weariness and his total loss of equilibrium he was quite calm.

But deep inside him, under his trained calm-

ness, Maynard felt a steadily growing triumph, a swelling exultation that was a thing quite apart from scientific pride. The feeling that he was a pioneer, an advance guard for a conquering people, stirred him and amplified the excitement in him when he turned his eyes to the forward port where Mars hung, full and rosy, a spotted magnetic disc of promise.

Earth hung in the after port behind and below him, a soft electric glow in its dirt blue quarter. A warm green circle that was home, a bustling verdant young world impatient to push its way across black empty space and satisfy its fiery curiosity about its cosmic neighbors.

He was at the end of his second day out, and he had covered exactly half of the distance he must travel. The sonic jet had run off long ago, at escape velocity, and would not come on again until they were needed to slow his approach. The midpoint lay just ahead; in a matter of minutes now he would leave Earth's warning field and fall free into the grasp of the red planet.

He was watching the coldest ball of the Main sequence appear on in that quarter threat with the first fluttering release of Earth's gravity when she fell came.

Terror struck him suddenly, pulverantly, blinding out all reason and all sensation. The control cubicle whirled giddily before his eyes, and the abruptness that gripped his mind was a monstrous thing boiling up out of unguessed subconscious depths. In frost bite, burning, like a man paralyzed under an overwhelming electric shock.

It was not fear of death. It was not even his own fate.

It was the blind peak of Something inside him whose existence he had never seriously suspected, Something that shivered suddenly in a secreted intense nerve and fought to tear itself free of him.

He was torn by the struggle for an inconceivable instant, and then it was over. He felt it writhe loose from the consciousness of his mind like a weakness writhing out of a strait-jacket, and then it was falling back toward Earth, away from him. He could sense it plainly, once it was outside him—a malcontent, intangible Thing that fell back giddily toward the emerald ocean of Earth.

He sat for a moment dazed while breath came back into his lungs and the strep-powdered cubicle grew steady again before his staring eyes. And when it had gone in the distance and he could no longer feel the fantasy of its weight, he felt the swift unbounded freedom that a splintered

horne took when it has, unexpectedly, lost its rider.

He was still Robert Maynard, but with a difference.

He was free.

THE feeling of unrestrained freedom staggered him. For the first time in his life he possessed himself entirely, without doubt or reservation, a complete and serene entity. He could feel his consciousness still expanding, reaching into every hidden corner of his mind and taking control of functions he had not dreamed of before.

An analogy occurred to him in perfect exactness of detail: he was like a man waking from a vague world of sleep to find that what he had thought a simple small room was in reality a spacious house. There were other rooms than the cramped chamber he had lived in all his life—rooms that had been presumed a roomant before by Something else, but which lay open and ready for his own use now that their Tenant was gone. A roomant before his ego had accepted a concept one-twelfth of his being; with its departure the whole of his mind was his.

As suddenly as that he knew what had happened to him and why, and his marvellously-multiplied intelligence arranged the details of a presently for his consideration.

He had been born to a possible intelligence, without knowing it, all his life. He had reared as an idiot, following his own will only when it slept or dazed or was distracted, never succeeding fully in any endeavor of his own because it was so control and must be obeyed. He knew when he had explored the remote province of his partly-thawed mind that it was only one of many, that all creatures had Tenants like it, intangible parasitic entities subsisting upon and controlling the human life force.

He thought: No wonder we have wars on Earth! We have no common ground for agreement because we are under *their* domination. They know our inherent abilities and keep us at each other's throats lest we learn of and destroy them. Everything that we have accomplished has been done in spite of *Them*.

He looked with new eyes at the instrument panel under the forward port and was amazed at the complexity of the engines it controlled. He was primarily an astrologer, and his understanding of atomic propulsion had been negligible; now its very functioning was clear to him as a glance. Instantaneously he drew a graph of the arc he described through space, and knew to a minute how long it would be before the landing jet slowed his speed for landing.

He raised his eyes to the forward port where the bulky disc of Mars hung framed against the black velvet backdrop of space like a red jewel burning daily among a random display of lesser

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brilliant, beckoning him on with the future's flimsy promise.

HE sat quite still for a time on the padded control couch, thinking intensely, warning the new powers of his mind as he might have feared a newly-discovered bomb.

His first conclusion was inescapable: his Tonsas had left him because it could not resist outside Earth's gravity. It had been forced to quit him or perish, and its departure had made him the first really free man.

They were not invincible. They were not even particularly intelligent, in spite of their gift of paralytic control, a. his own Tonsas would have known its danger. The fact that They were gravity-bound caution gave him the first vulnerable chink in Their armor, an Achilles heel that offered eventual salvation for men. There would be other ways to be rid of Them, and it was his responsibility as the first free man to see that others of his kind were freed as he had been.

He pictured the harmonious images of an Earth peopled by free men and now clearly the brightest men might reach unimpeded by their Tonsas. His own possibilities, when he had summed them up, owed him in their count. There were no limits to what he could do, no bounds to the knowledge he could accumulate and use.

This is what being a man is really like. I can liberate a world. Like Adam, I can see my people free.

The thought set his face shining, suffused him with a glow of unimagined triumph. It was all so simple, now that he was free . . .

In a few hours he would land on Mars, and in a matter of minutes he could set up a beam transmitter to report back to the scientific foundations that had sent him out. He could see all his fellows the truth because they were still captive, and their Tonsas must not be warned; but he could invent a plausible story of unimagined wealth on Mars that would bring other and larger commercial expeditions swarming after him. With the help of other freed men he could found a new civilization on the red planet, develop means to carry the fight back to Earth and guarantee the Tonsas utterly. It would take time, but in the end men would be free.

The Molar counterpoise spun slowly, and with the swing of its cobalt ball Maynard felt the shift from terrestrial to Martian gravity. He felt the first tug tug of weights and the slow swinging of equilibrium as his body oriented itself to the growing pull of the new attraction.

With the return of equilibrium he suddenly realized that he was upside down and turned to the control board for correction. The outside righted itself, swinging gently until the rapidly expanding disc of Mars hung below and ahead of the forward port. The Molar pendulum ceased

to oscillate, the little cobalt ball hanging idly at the end of its test quartz filament.

He was well into the Martian attraction field by now. He made a quick calculation (which once would have taken painstaking hours) and knew that he would release the first breaking blast from his forward gun in precisely ten hours. The little ship would move into a slowly retreating spiral, avoiding the odd-placed action of the two-ray magnetic wall, within minutes of establishing his destination track, he would be ready to land.

He watched eagerly as the red disc of Mars swelled to a mottled globe, blurred already at the edges by atmospheric refraction. Down there on the dead ground of that ancient world he would set up his equipment and flash back his triumphant message to Earth, a fulsome exultant yet that would bring other men like him swarming to the red planet.

Free men! Supermen, really, in a new free world. Nothing impossible, then!

LATER, he shut off the leading blast of the forward jet and felt the soft rubber-foam padding of the couch rise gently under him as deceleration ceased. He was well into his landing spiral, sailing up the galaxy thousands of miles that lay between him and the shining feature.

He lay back on the couch, smiling, his mind busy with the message he would beam back to Earth, planning already the campaign he would carry out. Years must pass before men were freed completely of their Tonsas, perhaps decades, but time did not matter. It was essentially a simple task because he and there to come after him would be free of Their compulsion—strong unimpeded eagerness to whom there was nothing.

In the end they could not fail . . .

Something impinged sharply upon his new perception, a dull groping towards questioning intelligence. The whole focus on his face; he sat up stiffly, assaulted with the unfamiliar horror of what was happening to him. The groping ceased, and the hungry intelligence from outside poured into his mind like smoke into an empty room, smothering his feeble attempt at resistance.

He rose and went to the forward port, staring dully down at the upsurging steady stream and trying to recall what glorious thing it was that he had been thinking. Or had it been only a dream? Somewhere in the furthest corner of his blunted consciousness a thought formed and floated like a bubble up into his awareness; but like a bubble it burst, and its meaning was lost on him.

There were Tonsas on Earth, it said. Why not on Mars, too?



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—says
CHARLES ATLAS

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DYNAMIC TENSION IS ALL I NEED

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